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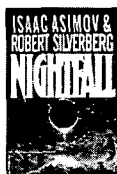
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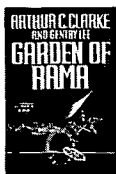
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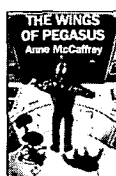
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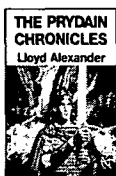
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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

RECENTLY I sat next to an older man on a crowded airplane. He saw the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* button I had pinned to my purse and asked me if I read science fiction. I told him that I did.

Then he launched into a long diatribe about how he has stopped reading all but the old classics, how science fiction no longer has science in its fiction. "Why," he asked me, "can't I find fiction like I used to read when I was a kid?"

His question became a theme over the next few months. As I sat on panels at science fiction conventions, audience members asked a similar question. During evening discussions, editors sat around and bemoaned the fact that no one set sf in space any more. What happened to the old science fiction traditions? people asked.

We bandied about a bunch of theories, but they all boiled down to only a few answers.

1. We outgrew them.
2. They're still with us.

3. We wouldn't recognize them if we read them.

The answers seem contradictory, but I believe they're all true. I also believe that they're not the only reasons for what people perceive to be a change in the genre.

Let's begin with point one: *We outgrew them*. People change as they get older. What makes for satisfying reading at age 12 usually doesn't satisfy at age 42. The science fiction readership has gotten older as the years progressed. Even though new, young readers are coming in, the bulk of the readership, if the surveys are to be believed, are in their thirties, forties and fifties, people who began reading the literature as children and haven't quit. They want sf that deals with adult themes and adult issues.

Adult themes and adult issues have always been part of sf. To say otherwise would be to trivialize the literature of the past sixty years. Which brings us to point two: *The traditions are still with us*. Science fiction has always been able to deal

with topical issues, to extrapolate futures from a common present, to warn, to celebrate, and to provide an understanding of the here and now. The 1990s are very different from the 1950s. Our lives have a faster pace. We use technological advances not even dreamed of 40 years ago. Science fiction reflects those changes, just as the science fiction of the 1950s reflected the culture then. Science fiction is as viable, if not more viable, now than it was then. New writers have come in and brought with them new styles. But the traditions remain the same.

But we don't recognize them. Because the writers, instead of writing about rockets and rayguns, write about computer implants and tiny machines that can change the character of a cell. Concerns of the 1990s, not of the 1950s, written for readers with the same concerns over the same period of time. In other words, point three: *We don't recognize the traditions when we read them.*

A body of literature is like any other living, breathing creature. If it doesn't grow and change, it will stagnate and die. The wonderful thing about reading is that books never go away. Visit a used book-

store, peruse a friend's collection. In there, among the musty smell of old paper, hides science fiction's past. The rockets and rayguns still live. The old traditions remain. But now we're forging ahead, continuing the traditions in a way that keeps the literature alive.

Sure, I would love to see more stories about space. I would also like to see more hard sf with some strong characterization. And I expect I will. But I hope that the stories I see read like stories from the 1990s instead of imitations of the 1950s, because we've lived through the 1950s. We don't have to live through them again. Instead, we need to continue the sf traditions and use the present as a jumping off point for the future.

I can't guess what form of transportation I'll use forty years from now to traverse the country. But I'll wager that if I get to sit next to someone, I'll find someone who wonders why the science fiction of the 2030s isn't like the science fiction he read as a kid. And maybe we'll discuss the old classics — novels and stories that haven't even been written yet.

I hope so. Because that means that science fiction has continued to grow and change.



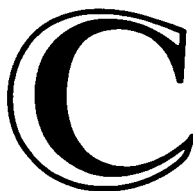
Rob Chilson is best known for his hard science fiction works. He has published dozens of stories in *Analog* and Warner Books published his latest novel, *ROUNDED WITH SLEEP*.

About "Far-Off Things," Rob writes, "The background [of the story] arose from speculation on such topics as: what will even as little as a thousand years of gene-splicing do to plants and animals — and people! Sandwiches and eggs growing on trees, talking animals, contraceptive tea and aspirin berries are all simple and obvious. The resulting economics also reminds me of the Land of Oz: a low-tech society with lots of leisure. And computers! What will a thousand or two years do to them! And language! What will a few thousand years of computer use do to it?" He combined it all into a story that reminds him more of Edgar Rice Burroughs pseudo-scientific fantasy than of the hardcore far-future sf that it really is.

FAR-OFF THINGS

By Rob Chilson

*Will no one tell me what she sings!
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago.
— William Wordsworth*



AIR TEL-BARKHA CROSS-
ed his father's meadow and cautiously approached the Lazy Brook, carrying a fishing rod. The stream flowed as sluggishly as its name implied, notwithstanding its snowmelt origin in the mountains above the Vale of Mahoggin. The old Sun glanced warmly from the brook's surface where not barred by the streamside trees, dyscalyptus and skeel and "red" quork of the dwarfed mountain variety.

He peered through the screen of shrubs and sprouts. Yes; there the lazy bace lay, sunning themselves in the shallow, slow-moving water, their fins barely moving. Overhead, redwings sang, "O Love, let us never let each other go," languidly in the afternoon heat. The bace said nothing — fish do not speak — but were clearly as satisfied as the birds.

Cair frowned, put out by their obvious indifference. He had his mouth

fixed for fish for supper, and the bace visibly weren't going to cooperate. He turned and looked at Mount Gogle, the northern boundary of the valley. It was midafternoon; the shadow of Og Oggieby's nose was halfway across the vast cliff that was his cheek. His stony gaze passed, distanced and indifferent, high over Cair's head, and Cair's gaze passed as indifferently away. He had been raised in the Vale of Mahoggin and had seen the great stone face every day of his life.

The redwings screamed in the trees above the Lazy Brook. "Look out, ha! Look out, ha!"

A shadow passed across him even as Cair jumped and turned in alarm, and he ducked. His gaze passed over Og Oggieby's visage again in bewilderment. Then a ship landed in his father's meadow.

Cair stood gaping in amazement, his rod slack in his hand. Once, years before, when he was in Ballyhoggin, the town had turned out to stare at an airship far out over the lowlands. It was the only one Cair had ever seen, though he knew that from the mouth of the Vale, one was seen nearly every year.

The ship was a varnished, coffin-shaped box, its deck twice as high as his head. Its length was about ten times its height. From each side, a mast longer than the ship projected up and out over the rail, guyed fore and aft to bowsprit and sternsprit. Below each mast was a thinner yard of the same length. These yards had now been raised above the horizontal by the sheer posts at the rails; normally they projected out and down from the bottom. The sky-blue sails had not been furled, and lay collapsed over the long meadow grass.

Three of his father's draft animals, Stalwarts of six legs each, approached, grass still dangling from their astonished mouths. They voiced curiosity and concern: "What is it, eh?" "It crushes our grass, ha!" "Must we haul that huge bulk, eh?"

Cair approached slowly, seeing the windmill-shaped propeller beneath the sternsprit, parallel to the ship's axis to exert its force sideways. He gaped up at the glittering windows of the fore and aft cabins.

An old man with a white beard leaped over the rail and slid down a rope into the button-blooms that spangled the meadow in all colors. He gave Cair a disgusted look that had nothing to do with him, for he immediately turned to bellow at the aeriners. Men and women clad in sky blue followed him to the ground to unsnarl the tangle of cordage and

canvas below the yards.

The old man turned to Cair. "It is accomplished," he said bitterly, and spat into the meadow grass. "You are who, youngling?" In his emotion he omitted the interrogative Executant, *eh*, that with the Utterance would have completed his sentence.

Youngling. Cair became conscious of the figure he cut: barefoot, in rough, bib-fronted brown trousers, dilapidated straw hat on his head, fishing rod in hand. The very definition of rustic simplicity. He flushed slowly to match his flannel shirt. It, too, was of rustic seeming, faded and worn-out at the elbows.

"I am called Cair tel-Barkha, heh," he said shortly, tempted to omit the Executant response to interrogation.

"And Barkha, eh?"

Cair puzzled over this for a moment, then comprehended. "He was an ancestor now forgotten, heh. My father's name is Hoanna. This is our land." Upon the instant he regretted the last, but could think of no way to retrieve himself.

The old aeriner spat again into the grass and turned to look westward, where the Vale of Mahoggin opened into the lowlands below the Lynetian Mountains. Blue haze of distance, more a dream than a distant land. Beyond, that great sea, the Heartwaters of Woe, sparkled and gleamed on the horizon. Below the Sun stood Sigil Moon in crescent, looking like a sliver of some great copper-and-silver target.

Cair approached the old man, drawn, uncertain.

An airship! He'd only begun to take it in. A ship of men and women who sailed the streams of air, faring far from the places of their births. Whence came they? Where were they bound?

"This would be the Vale of Mahoggin, by the sight of old Gog there," said the bearded man. Cair was vaguely surprised to find that the other came no higher than his shoulder. He followed the other's gesture with his gaze.

"We call that one Og Ogglesby," he said.

"And Magog," said the old man. "I see him not at all. Where is he, eh?" He turned to peer south across the Vale at the distance-faded slope across from Mount Gogle. The southern mountain Cair knew as Mount Boggle.

Magog he had never heard of; nor, for that matter, Gog. Cair looked back at Og Ogglesby with some irritation. He felt more rustic than ever

that this stranger, who likely hadn't been born within a thousand miles of the Vale, should know more about it than he, who had been raised here.

Abruptly he knew that he had seen Og Oggleby's stony indifference too many times and that he hated it, hated the Vale of Mahoggin, hated the generations-old stone house in which he'd been born and would no doubt die, hated, too, the social conventions that would presently force him to marry his cousin Jethil and go to producing children and food. And he hated most of all the knowledge that he would never be more than a rustic with bare feet and empty head, looking down from a sheltered vale onto a world where Life went on, from a place where it did not.

The old man took his arm.

"This is the position," he said earnestly. "The old *Swordbeak* there has been blown out of her course by a gale we found over the Oriental Plain. Worst, we lost two hands reefing sail — I can't believe it. Deek-Deek was no professor, but not a fool, with wit enough to hold fast, I'd have said. And Harmel, too."

He shook his head, his white beard wagging glumly. Above one eye was a black, four-pointed star, his trademark; a place where the natural melanin of the skin was expressed. Cair's trademarks, like those of most men of the Vale, were a pair of small *M* characters in circles, one high on each cheekbone.

"So now we find ourselves belated, off-course, and shorthanded, forced to pick up hands wheresoever we may," said the aeriner. "You're a most prime candidate, lad. Mountainy men are agile, and those who go barefoot are deft o'foot, as an aeriner must needs be." He squinted confidingly up at Cair, apparently encouraged by Cair's hesitation.

Squeezing Cair's arm again, he said, "What say you, eh, lad? It's a fine, bully life among the clouds, with never a dull day. Cats thrive on it. You'll be that glad of your choice, many's the day to come you'll thank me for the offer, and your Three Fathers for the chance."

This fell in so exactly with Cair's previous musings that he felt himself powerfully pulled by it. Should he pass by this adventure, Chance might never favor him so again. He would never forgive himself. At the same time, he felt all the caution that prudence would dictate, combined with the tug of his folks' expectations. What would his father, Hoanna, say? His cousin Jethil?

The lust for adventure came momentarily top, and he asked, "What

would you offer me, eh: salt, fee, or lay?" Salary, a flat fee for the trip, or a share in the profits, if any.

"Oh, lay, lay, heh. We are all upon the lay, lad."

"Aye? What lay would you offer a sturdy lad like me, eh?" Cair asked, trying to sound shrewd.

"Hmm," said the other, with equal shrewdness. The many fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes were all emphasized. "There is a sixteen and a half of us," he said calculatingly, eyeing Cair's chest and arms.

Cair opened his eyes wide at this; it was twice the crew an airship would normally have. He suspected the *Swordbeak* of being a smuggler or worse.

"Put you on the thirty-second lay," said the aeriner after a moment.

Cair calculated in his turn. If there was a tetron, a sixteen, and a half of crew, and each shared equally, they were all upon the twenty-fourth lay. He was being offered three-fourths of a share. Yet he was unskilled and untried; he might be worth more than that. After all, though he'd climbed mountains, he'd never been farther off ground than he could jump.

Cair nodded. "Seems fair enough," he said slowly.

"I'd have to tell my father," he added at a sudden thought. It came home to him that this was not theoretical, that this blue-clothed man meant to whisk him away, perhaps forever, from the Vale of Mahoggin and all he knew and loved.

"Likely he knows, lad; they're not blind down yonder," said the old man, pointing with his beard toward Cair's father's manse.

Cair looked and saw only the roofs of the big old house. But he had no doubt that the family had all seen the airship with its wide blue sails come down in the meadow.

"I'd have to get my things — say good-bye —" Cair was grasping at straws now for an excuse to refuse. None of these things were adequate, and he paused, groping for better ones.

"We'll outfit you with a good suit of sky blues from the slop chest — that quork brown is well enough for groundlings, but *Swordbeak's* a proud ship. And we'll drop a message to your family," said the old man firmly, tugging at his arm.

Undecided, Cair let himself be urged toward the ship. He made up his mind that he'd at least get closer and take a good, satisfying squint at the thing. "What lofts the ship, eh?" he asked.

"An ancient high Mondeign mechanism, a weft of pure force a million years old, heh," said the aeriner. "It lacks all sagacity, unlike the ancient demons, and it is theorized that in those lucent days, it raised and lowered elevator cars in shafts, or perhaps drove cars horizontally. It can exert its force in but one direction, unfortunately. It is easily controlled, and threads its impalpable substance through the beams of whatever vessel it is directed to motivate."

A woman called from the rail. "Captain Daunce, ha! All raffle cleared."

The old man's hand tightened on his arm. "Come, lad! Upping ship!"

Cair let himself be hustled forward, beside the great yard, walking on crumpled canvas part of the way. His hearts beating heavily, one on each side of his chest, Cair looked up at the rail high over his head, then seized a rope and hand- and foot-walked his way up the inward-sloping side. This tumble home was not extreme, but he had rappelled down worse slopes. His head came above the rail, and he gaped at the varnished deck, the coils of rope, the blocks, the sheers, the rope truss, the hatches and cabins, the gleam of brass and sheen of glass.

Somewhere he had lost his fishing rod, he realized, and turned to look down for it, but the captain was right below him on the rope, and Cair swarmed clumsily over the rail.

A broad-faced but not unattractive woman approached. As with most women, she had no trademarks on her face, but the aeriner's white shirt, open in front under her blue jacket, showed an insectlike black mark between her breasts. A place where two inherited trademarks had overlapped, a sign of hybridizing.

"Anmal, this is Cair Somebody, of Mahoggin. Sign him on the thirty-second lay, ho," said Captain Daunce. "We'll drop a note to his people at yonder manse."

"Aye, oh. This way, ho," said Anmal curtly; and, bewildered, Cair followed.

She led him into the companionway behind the helmsman, a tiny shed over the head of a ladder, and down to the 'tween decks, where she opened the Crewbook. In a hasty gabble, she read the Articles: "We the Crewmen of the good Ship *Swordbeak* of the Air, do compact and agree that We will at all Times aid, trust, defend, and uphold each Other with all Cheerfulness and banning all Grudges and Spites, sharing Work and Leisure, Wind and Weather, good Fortune and bad. And We further compact and agree

that We will obey the lawful Orders of Our chosen Captain and other Officers, deferring all Disputes with them and among our Selves till We again be hard Aground. Which We severally Swear by that Chance which We Each hold most Sacred. Amen."

On the next two pages was a list of names, each printed in a fair hand and also signed. Three had ominous red lines drawn through them. Anmal readied two lines for him under all the others. Under the column for *Lay*, she wrote, 32. Bent under the low overhead, Cair dumbly signed his name on the line.

Anmal grunted, reading his name. She printed it below his signature, quickly but neatly. "I am the ship's disciplinary officer," she informed him. "You have no vote till your probation's up. I'm putting you on probation for one high-lunar month. Appeal is to the Ship's Council, not to the captain. Agreed, eh?"

"Agreed heh," Cair said faintly. The Prime Mondeign, the First World, at this time had seven moons, of which the two highest, Sigil and Second Moons, each revolved in thirty-two days, two tetrons. But exactly what he would vote upon at the end of those thirty-two days, he did not comprehend.

Anmal was proffering pen and paper. "Write quickly: a note to your family."

Hastily, hearing the thud of rapid feet above, Cair wrote: *Dear Pa and All, I have signed the Articles on the good Ship Swordbeak of the Air for 1 Voyage. I'll see You all when I come Home.* He signed it with a scrawl.

Anmal had blown up and tied off a balloon while he wrote. Seizing the note, she folded it twice and thrust it into a bag. Dropping a couple of pebbles into the bag, she tied it to the balloon.

"Here, take this."

Carrying the balloon, Cair bewilderedly followed her hasty steps up the ladder. The top deck was quiet, the aeriners at their posts. Captain Daunce was sending up puffs of white smoke from a brazier and bellows. They drifted slowly west, toward the manse and the lowlands far away. The Captain glanced at the helmsman and jerked his thumb up once. The helmsman advanced a polished brass lever to the first notch.

The deck surged beneath Cair's feet, and his stomach quivered. *Swordbeak* began to rise as gently as had the smoke. Cair turned to look over the side, his hearts beating quickly, his breath short. The blue sails,

carefully untangled from the disarray in which they had lain, unfolded slowly as the masts lifted. A call from Captain Daunce caused the aeriners at the sheers to slack off the ropes that had raised the yards, and those long timbers lowered, stretching the sails between them. In moments the great ship floated free, its goosewing sails extended and slack, poised above the meadow and rotating slowly while the Stalwarts stared.

Og Oggleby looked past above them, uncaring.

Already the ship was drifting, turning slowly about, westward on the light air falling down from the head of the Vale. *Swordbeak* floated over the Lazy Brook, leaving the puzzled Stalwarts behind. Captain Daunce jerked his thumb again, and again the helmsman advanced his lever; the ship lofted to double its previous height. Still it drifted, rotating, idly down the Vale at the pace of a rapid walk.

His chest tight with excitement, Cair stared overside, gripping the balloon by its string. Below, the orchard of sandwich-bearing trees seemed mere puffs of green floating above their shadows. From above, he could not see the heavy green husks hanging down. Next, the orchard of taller, cheese-bearing trees; their heavy yellow gourds gleamed between the leaves. Staring up, openmouthed, his shiftless cousin Mervine rode in a cart pulled by two Pontids, small draft beasts who seemed oblivious of the ship. Boy, beasts, and cart looked like toys. All the roads, tracks, and trails of his father's farm seemed threads of white of varying width.

Two Velocipedes came loping along the orchard's aisles, craning their necks to look up at the ship, calling out to each other in excitement. Neither was ridden; their excitement must have overcome their innate compulsion to remain within their pasture. As he watched, they sailed easily over the fence that separated the cheese orchard from the cart road, then over the fence on the other side, into the honey trees, their long legs seeming from above to spraddle like spider legs. They paced the ship at a fraction of their crackling top speed till they approached the manse, whereupon, abashed, they stopped in another road and fell to cropping the verdure as innocently as they might.

A couple of aeriners approached Cair where he stood peering over the polished rail. "Excellent riding beasts," observed one.

"We consider those the best for riding purposes," Cair told him.

At his obtuse-seeming reply, they looked blankly at each other. One murmured, "Ah, of course," and they turned away, shaking their heads.

Cair turned into the grin of a woman somewhat older than himself, sharp-nosed, blonde, and blue-eyed in the fashion of the Oriental Plain. "You're not the bumpkin you appear," she said. "But I fear your country humor is too subtle for these sophisticates. Chisel, as we call him, is from Mondisle, and lets no one forget it."

Cair blinked and glanced west, toward the Heartwaters and the seat of that great island city, heart of the antique Realm of Hanchel. Then, forgetting that, he looked down.

Swordbeak was approaching the manse within a hundred yards or so. A rambling, sprawling building it was, of numerous gables and three front doors, added to for many generations. Every inhabitant, human and animal, was out-of-doors, peering up, calling and crying out excitedly. He even saw his pounce-cat, Spikes.

"Now: drop your balloon, ha!" said the woman. "Wave your hat! Call down your farewells!"

With mixed feelings of exultation and regret, Cair did these things. His chest was tighter than ever, and his hearts thundered; his voice tended to crack.

"Throw down your hat, for a last souvenir, ha!" exclaimed the woman, and this he did also.

Cair stood, spent, peering down upon the house's multiple slate roofs, hot in the sunshine; upon the treetops, the pens and barns and sheds, the arbors and vineyards, the flower and kitchen and herb gardens, the roads and paths that had defined his life up till now. And upon the faces of all he had known and loved. They all stood staring up, ignoring his balloon and hat.

Now he was looking back and down, and they were waving to him from a greater distance: *Swordbeak* was past the manse. Belatedly, some ran to recover the balloon and the hat. He could not make out who did this. Cair leaned over the rail, peering back and down, less exalted, feeling the first pangs of homesickness and sorrow.

The manse and its cluster of habiliments receded, diminished. *Swordbeak* surged again beneath his feet, and though caught by surprise, Cair felt no nausea or other discomfort. Congratulating himself faintly for that, he turned and looked about the deck.

The woman who had spoken to him watched sympathetically. Captain Daunce indicated a clutter of buildings miles down the Vale and asked

him, "What town is that, eh?"

"Ballyhoggin, heh," said Cair. His voice seemed to come from a distance to his ears.

Captain Daunce nodded, and jerked his thumb twice more. Again *Swordbeak* surged, this time bounding much higher into the air. The sails rustled.

Cair's gaze was caught by Og Oggleby's, which he now met eye-to-eye. His hair rose slightly at that great visage's unfathomable expression. Deep and sad, it looked at far-off things, seeing nothing that was not a million years old.

A fussy-looking little man with gray hair and an iron expression strolled aft from the cabin forward, passenger country. His exquisite wine-purple "false-front" jacket had three wine-red lapels overlaying each other. Lace edged with sea-gold foamed on his shirtfront and at his wrists.

"Ah, there lies Magog, even as the old books say," said he. "I told you this was the Vale of Mahalwin, ha."

"Mahoggin," said the captain curtly, and the exquisite snorted waspishly.

Cair turned to look at distant Mount Boggle. Across it was another vast face, much like Og Oggleby's, so eroded as to be imperceptible from below. Its expression was unknowable, so deeply was it marred. It might almost have been a chance assemblage of features occurring by Nature's art: two symmetrical caverns for eyes, two rudely hacked cliffs for cheeks, a moldering projection that had once been a nose; below, a slash, a ledge, and a crumble that had been lips, mouth, chin.

It looked back at Og Oggleby. Cair shook his head. Gog and Magog, the aeriners named them from old books. Would wonders never cease? Here he'd lived his life beneath that other face, all unknowing.

"Ha!" said, or snorted, the man in the false-front jacket. "Kindly do not keep us drifting about here all day, Captain, admiring the view, ho. We're days behind schedule as it is. Kimmel Ran must be back in Mondisle within the tetron."

The captain tightened his lips and caught up his bellows. He wafted smoke and ordered the ship lofted again.

"Who's the old man, eh?" Cair asked sotto voce.

"Eless tel-Raunce," the woman said wryly. "A professor from East Point on The Mouth. He and Kimmel Ran chartered us to go look for some

historical junk. What a pair of mouths, ha."

Swordbeak rocked lightly as it passed out of the cooled, heavy air sweeping down from the mountaintops and into the uprush of warmer air from the lowlands. It checked in its flight and hesitated, the sails bellying backward with loud flaps. A small floc of white cloud drifted fleecelike beside the ship; Cair noted it blankly, his emotions dulled. Others appeared here and there, at the join of warm air and cool.

At the captain's gesture, the helmsman set the stern propeller in motion, its great wheel revolving with a hiss of steam, exerting its force sideways. Ponderously, the ship came about, rotating till its bow steadied to the west, into the wind.

"Hands wear ship, ho!" said Captain Daunce.

"Bear a hand, lad!" called the blonde woman, and, jolted out of his musing, Cari ran to help.

At each mast was a capstan. Swiftly, the blonde woman looped two heavy ropes around the port capstan's barrel, then unlooped them from their bitts — short posts protruding from the deck. Looking fore and aft, Cair saw that these ropes lay along the rail to the tips of the bow- and sternsprits, where they were rove through pairs of slung pulleys. From the sprits, they swept out to the tips, respectively, of the great port mast, and down to that of the port yard.

Cair took up a capstan bar from the rack along the rail and inserted it into the pawl. On her word, they flung themselves on the chest-high bar, Cair's bare toes gripping the worn cleats pegged to the deck. The capstan turned readily, so that he almost fell forward.

"Handsomely," she said, adding: "That means slowly and steadily, lad."

"My name is Cair tel-Barkha," he said, panting more from excitement than exertion. He stepped over the ropes as he went round.

"And mine is Syconium," she said. That was the name of a fruit; aeriners were often on the dodge if not on the scout. She confirmed it by adding, "I'm Sy to my friends, and they don't ask."

"Then Sy let it be," he said, stepping over the ropes again. He caught her grin, and turned his head to glance out at the mast.

It was slowly walking forward across the face of *Magog*, working through a slot in the deck. On the other side, the starboard mast was walking as steadily aft, as other aeriners went round and round the starboard capstan. The yards went with them.

The freshening breeze came into the slanting blue sails. The propellers — there was another forward, under the bowsprit — both pushing the ship to starboard, kept the bow headed into it. So the ship, rather than being blown straight back by the wind, was blown sidewise to port, and thus pushed forward. Tacking, Cair knew it was called.

"Cease, ho; belay the masts," said Captain Daunce.

Cair stopped pushing, leaning into the capstan bar. The breeze, seeming stronger now that *Swordbeak* was resisting it, pushed and pushed the bar against his chest.

"I'll hold it," Syconium said. She gestured to the bitts. "Belay the ropes."

He leaped to the bitts. Bracing one foot against the rail stanchion, he hauled on the bottom rope, clumsily made a loop of the slack, and dropped it over the bit. Then again with the mast's spring.

Whew, he thought, but before he could turn, a palm slapped into his back. "Good lad," said Syconium, and he flushed. She had secured the capstan with a simple, built-in brake.

"Now make the ropes fast to the belaying pins in the rack, lest the springs creep under pressure of the wind," she said. "Then come below, and let's get you into a more suitable rig."

She turned an inquiring glance on the captain, who nodded. Following Sy, Cair realized that Captain Daunce had had him under pretty sharp observation, though he'd been too modest to realize it.

The blonde aeriner led him to the companionway. The aftcastle, crew's quarters, lay just forward of the captain's cabin and the ship's office in which Cair had signed the Articles. In the aftcastle a huge man — or rather, a bald ogre — slept on two bunks shoved together. Cair wondered how the fellow could move in this cramped space.

Noticing his glance, Sy said, "Yes, there's scarce two of us alike, several species of man-kin, even a jackman. That's the Bull. The passengers are even stranger. Here: the slops."

The "slop chest" turned out to be a couple of closets. Sy jerked at his galluses, tossed them over his head; his bibbed overalls fell. Rustic though the Vale was, it had no strong nudity taboo.

"Get your shirt off, ho," she said. In moments he was stripped down to his loin-swaddle. He hoped it was clean.

Sy pulled sky-blue canvas pants out, finally found a pair that fit him, if a bit loosely. He put them on while she pulled out white flannel shirts and

sky-blue jackets. Presently he was attired in sturdy aeriner's working clothes, still bare of feet, and his discarded straw hat had been replaced with two "toppers." One was a waxed, or "slushed," blue canvas hat; the other was a knit stocking cap without a point, a heavy blue canvas band around its brow.

This last he donned now, and stood while Sy knotted a ribbon-tie around his neck, a darker blue than the pants and jacket.

"You look a proper aeriner now," she said approvingly, and, tiptoeing, gave him a quick, sisterly kiss. "Come, back to work!"

Cair followed her to the deck, greatly cheered by life among the clouds so far. *Swordbeak* was making good westing; soon they'd be south of Ballyhoggin.

Captain Daunce eyed Cair briefly, said, "Good, huh. Best to weather him now. Hands reef sail, ho!"

"Aye, aye sir," said Syconium. "Reefing sail, oh!" She gestured to Cair, who swallowed but followed her, having an idea of what came next.

"Reef!" cried the professor from East Point. "The air's scarcely moving, ha! Loft us, Captain, and put us on a northerly reach. Ongra lies west-northwest of Mahalwin."

"I am captain, Eless tel-Raunce, huh," said Captain Daunce, using the rarely used declarative Executant for emphasis. "I alone command *Swordbeak's* movements until I am deposed by the Ship's Council. Kindly don't jog my elbow, ho."

Undaunted the feisty professor snorted again: "Ha!"

Sy led Cair to the root of the great port mast. It was thicker than he. "Come on!" Gripping the top of it, her back to the wind, she put her feet on a rope that was slung four feet below the mast. Sliding her feet sideways, she worked her way out over the rail.

Gulping, Cair followed more slowly. Keeping a death grip on the mast, eyes straight ahead and staring, Cair slid his feet along the rope. Outward he went, and up, the mast trembling at his chest to the thrust of the wind in the sail. His ribbon-tie snapped smartly about. Presently the mast curved into a horizontal attitude; then down. Hearts in his throat, Cair followed Sy.

Finally they were at the mast end, and she called him close to her. "Watch!" Reaching down with one hand, she clawed at the slackened sail, pulled it up toward her in bunches.

Imitating her, Cair looked down at the blue billow — then past it at the faded green of the ground far, far below. For long moments he froze, his hair trying to rise; then, with an effort, he jerked himself together and tugged upward at the canvas.

"One hand only!" Sy said. "Remember: one hand for the ship, one hand for yourself."

Cair nodded, unable to speak, and tugged at the canvas. With infinite care, he looked to his left and down, to see that aeriners at the mast root had raised the yard to slacken the sail. At the rail was a sheer post, a tall pole with an even longer pole thrust out over the side at forty-five degrees. Two ropes were threaded through pulleys on the ends of these poles, reaching down to the yard. The aeriners had wound them up, raising the yard and loosening the sail.

"Now: bring the reef point in," said Sy.

There was a row of short, strong cords hanging from the sail, a fathom down. Sy had pulled her part up till she had hold of one of these reef points. Dexterously, she bundled the sail against the mast, then brought the ends of the reef point up on opposite sides of the mast, tying them together over it in a square knot.

Imitating her, Cair found that the reef points passed through grommets in a reinforced strip of the sail. He bundled the sail and tied it off as tightly as he could.

"Move down, ho," she said, adding: "no, to the second reef point."

Shuffling to his left, Cair passed one reef point and clawed again at the canvas. Leaning forward to reach down at the sail, his bare feet pushed the footrope back, so that his knees bent, much of his weight on his chest against the mast. It was actually quite a stable position, he reflected, and moved more confidently. Sy still finished before him, tested his knot, and said, "Good."

And so it went, as they slowly worked their way back toward the ship. From time to time, in sheer terror, his feet cramped painfully, and he could not relieve them.

"Sorry I'm so slow," Cair said.

"Normally there'd be four aeriners on the mast," Sy told him. "But the purpose is less to reef than to weather you."

Cair was sweating freely but not resentful; he nodded. For a moment he glanced left, at the after half of the deck. A polished wooden rectangle;

very, very small; very far away. Beyond it, Og Ogglesby now looked away past them; they were west of his melancholy gaze.

"Why do we not simply use propellers to thrust us into the wind, eh?" he asked.

"It would take huge ones with huge engines, heh. The fuel supplies would take up our hold, and bite deeply into our profits besides. Many ships are lucky enough to have force-wefts that not only loft but propel them, but most of them must buy force at the force-fountains; the winds are free. Those risk running out of force in the air. Fortunately, our lofter creates its own."

On they worked. They gradually climbed the slope of the mast to the top of the curve. Here their work was hampered by the great rope truss, thick as Cair's thigh, that reached from the highest point of the mast's gull-wing curve to the top of the starboard mast. Cair felt the mast jolt and quiver, and convulsively gripped it.

"Tacking," said Sy tersely.

Cair looked right, to see the sprawling, tree-clad slope of Mount Boggle so near he could make out individual trees. Magog was east of them, and the slopes were less extreme here. Twisting round fearfully, Cair made out the huddle of Ballyhoggin's roofs a little forward of the ship and well north. His family's manse was aft and also north.

The mast walked aft steadily, and the propellers were feathered in the opposite direction. To Cair, no great difference was apparent. Now they were coming down the near curve of the mast, which was steeper but shorter than the far curve. The sail here got progressively narrower, so that pulling it up was easy. Presently they had completed their chore and stood again on deck. Cair was trembling faintly all over, but tried to master it.

"Satisfactory," said Captain Daunce, with a glance at the sail. To Sy, he said, "You'd call him weathered, eh?"

"Well, no, sir, heh. But he's made a fair beginning."

"Huh. Tell me, youngling, what is that tumble of ruins down at the mouth of the valley, eh?"

Cair looked, saw the old ruined city of Mahogganesque, from which the Vale of Mahoggin allegedly derived its name. Its deepest foundations were said to have been dug during the Heights of Man, those lucent days a million years ago. Briefly, he said as much. "Told you so," said the elegant

little professor, standing idly by.

The diminutive captain grunted, looked up. "Hands wear ship, ho!"

Cair made for the port mast, but the aeriner called Chisel sprang toward it, followed by his friend. Chisel turned his dark, handsome face to Cair and barked, "Come, farm boy, ha! We do not amble to our tasks aboard *Swordbeak* like lackwitted draft beasts. Leap to it, ho."

Cair hurried forward, inwardly burning, risking a side-glance at the captain, who obviously had heard but gave no sign. Ruefully, Cair reflected that the other was much less friendly than when he'd conzened the farm boy in his meadow. Sy went forward, leaving him to deal with them. Chisel and his friend irritatedly corrected Cair's actions at every turn, once with some justification.

Farm boys, even in the Vale of Mahoggin, are not unfamiliar with hazing, and develop their own ways of dealing with it. Cair permitted his bar to slip out of its pawl, striking Chisel's friend a smart blow on the ribs. He cried out in pain and anger, and Cair exclaimed, "Sorry, sir, ha! Please to excuse my clumsiness."

Cair was a head taller than the friend, half a head taller than Chisel, and visibly stronger than either; they subsided. Again Captain Daunce had missed nothing, but said nothing.

The only one who paid attention was a Deoman, one of the black species of man-kin. His skin was like polished ebony with purple highlights. Well dressed, a passenger. This big fellow laughed, to the discomfiture of the aeriners. Cair was not pleased himself with the attention; Deomen ate meat, a rarity in a world where treemeat grew wild, and were accounted savage in consequence.

The mast belayed, Chisel wrathfully said, "Raise up your jacket, Shered, and let's see what this clumsy lout has done to you."

The aeriner had a large black bruise on his ribs. They glared at Cair, who grimaced in apology, idly slapping the capstan bar into a palm as hard as it. The two aeriners subsided and sloped off aft.

The captain indicated Cair. "Put him onto slushing the truss, ho," he said to Sy.

"Aye, aye, sir."

With a sympathetic smile, Syconium gestured Cair to the companion-way. Down next to the aftcastle was a locker full of various airy appurtenances. She fitted him with a small pot full of, by the odor, a

mixture of berrywax and clear cooking fuel, the oil thinning the wax to a slushy consistency. He lashed this at his belt by its bail. Next, a couple of squares of cotton waste. The middles of these rags were drawn into knots, a piece of twine tied around each and looped over his wrists.

On deck again, Sy pointed out the footrope beneath the truss. "You're to go along it and swab it down with the slush, top and bottom. Clear enough, eh? Have a care you do not fall, and be even more particular that you do not drop slush upon *Swordbeak's* fine, clean deck — or upon the captain. Eh? Eh? Off with you, then, ho!"

She gave him an encouraging push, and Cair sighed, walked slowly across the deck, and made his way out along the mast to the truss. Much thinner than the mast, the truss seemed much less safe. It trembled faintly and continuously. However, as Cair fearfully but methodically made his way to his left, he found that it was not much different from reefing the sail: the great thing was not to look down.

Presently he was above the deck. The conversation there came clearly to his ears; he felt so removed from the concerns of the ship that this surprised him.

Below, another passenger had come aft, and she and the professor, *Eless tel-Raunce*, discussed *Mahogganesque*. Cair learned more about it in five minutes than he'd learned in his whole life through. It was indeed a *High Mondeign* site, a million and more years old. They also mentioned the name *Mahal Goguelin*, a wizard of the Realm of *Hanchel*, important in the history of the Vale.

This second passenger was a bulky woman with graying hair and a severe expression, who wore the costume of a wizard: gray-blue overtunic and belted peach chiton, gray-blue leggings cross-gartered with peach chords, peach tassels on her shoes. She was addressed as *Kimmel Ran*, a name from the Western "*Hundreds*" (*Octrans*).

Cair carried on grimly till he had reached the starboard end of the truss. Here he almost fell; in his haste at concluding his task, he became careless. He seized the mast in a grim embrace till his hearts slowed, spilling the slush down his new pants. Presently he was recovered and made his way back along the starboard-mast footrope.

On deck, no one took notice of him, or of his accident, which had left a shiny, wet streak on his pants. Even *Syconium* was occupied at the jack staff forward. He went with what dignity he could to the companionway.

Descending to the locker, he returned the slush pot to store and scrubbed at his pants with cotton waste.

Returning to the deck, he took up an inconspicuous position near the port rail. Below, Mahogganesque was a sprawl of ruins, but looking down on the hills surrounding it, Cair observed with wonder their regularity. It was obvious that these tumuli concealed more ruins, and yet more ruins. The ancient High Mondeign city had once sprawled for miles, right across the mouth of the Vale.

Presently the helmsman rang a mellow gong.

Puzzled, Cair looked about. Aeriners made for the companionway; another band of aeriners surfaced from it.

"Cair, hey!" Syconium's voice.

"Cair, yo!" he responded.

"Watch below, ha." Following her quickly, he arrived at the companion-way just as the bald ogre emerged. The big subhuman halted to stare at him.

"New hand, huh," said Sy. "This is Cair tel-Barkha of the Vale of Mahoggin."

The ogre grunted. "Folks call me the Bull. I'm an ogre, real strong, but not too bright."

"I'm a farm boy," said Cair, offering a fist. "Also strong, but not too bright."

The Bull paused in the act of advancing his fist, and stared at Cair under lowered eyebrows. "Eh?" Then he bellowed with laughter, startling Cair, and struck Cair's fist with so much goodwill as to leave it tingling. "A joke, a good joke on old Bull, ha! Farm boy, waw-haw-haw!" Subsiding as abruptly as he'd begun, he seized Cair's shoulders in his mighty paws and bent to bring their heads on a near level. Peering into Cair's eyes and nodding seriously, the ogre said, "You'll weather well into a fine aeriner. And if ever you need help, call on the Bull, farm boy."

"Hands reef sail, ho," said Captain Daunce, and the ogre broke away.

Sy led Cair belowdecks, grinning. "Your luck is up, farm boy. You need a rest before you go back out on the mast."

She took him below to her cubby in the aftcastle and drew the curtain around the bed, immediately beginning to unbutton his jacket and shirt. Cair was pleased but not surprised. He got but little rest in the next hour, and indeed was astonished that he had the stamina for this. But his

previous terrors had stimulated him amazingly.

Sexual congress was no stranger to him; he had been meeting with his cousin Jethil for the past three years, and when she ceased to take the contraceptive tea and thus became pregnant, she would become marriageable.

Cair lay on the dozing Syconium's breast and pondered his lack of guilt feelings over this infidelity to his cousin. But *Swordbeak* and his new circumstances were so different from life in the Vale that he could make no connection between then and now. This was all a dream.

I wonder if I'll ever see the Vale again, and Jethil, he thought as he dozed off. The thought carried no emotion.

AFTER A couple of hours, a clangor announced dinner, and Sy roused. The aeriners in this fine weather took their meal alfresco, on the deck. It consisted of a hearty slumgullion; a salad based on boiled eggs and nuts; dark, rich bread; tangy cheese, washed down by hot red tea brewed strong. They ate off wooden trays set with porcelain bowls and small plates, the trays elaborately carved, the plates and bowls delicately painted — by the aeriners, they told him.

Looking aft as he ate, Cair saw that the Lynetian Mountains bulked high. The mouth of the Vale of Mahoggin was still distinct; Cair caught a gleam from some window in Ballyhoggin. Far below, *Swordbeak* sailed over a hilly, green-clad land striped by brawling rivers down out of the highlands. Forward, the shore of the Heartwaters of Woe was near, still the economic and cultural center of Tanolant continent, though no longer its political center. Not since the downfall of the Realm of Hanchel thirty-five hundred years ago.

"Making good time," observed one of the aeriners.

The lee mast was pulled as far forward as it would go, projecting well past the bow, and the weather mast was as hard astern. The wind had freshened sharply, causing their trouser legs and ribbon-ties to flap. Presently they crossed the shoreline and sailed above the tossing billows of the inland sea. Four-winged gulls flew about them with their incessant cry: "Give me food, ho!"

About dusk the watch changed again, and Cair had to lay out along the port mast to check all the reef points and reeve those that looked

doubtful. There were four of them upon the mast: first Syconium at the post of honor, then Shered, then Chisel, then Cair. Shered and Chisel hurried him as much as they could, but Cair did not let himself be rushed. Back on deck, he hardly trembled, despite the accumulated fatigues of the day.

So, for three days, *Swordbeak* reached to the west-northwest across the Heartwaters. For three days and nights, Cair learned the trade of the aeriner, and though he never became nonchalant about laying out on the masts, he learned to do it even in the darkness.

Once he even laid out on the port yard, a highly dangerous position because of the downward slope and the bellying sail above. He learned to stand his trick at the throttles of the propellers, and took part in the daily varnishing of the deck and the polishing of the brightwork. He began to learn many other things: knots, splicing, sail mending.

Chisel's antagonism never diminished. An exchange during Cair's first breakfast aboard confirmed their antagonism: Chisel asked, "How have you enjoyed the ride, eh, farm boy?"

"Better than my father's riding beasts, heh," he said, and the crew laughed at the man from Mondisle, Sy loudest.

It never came to blows, except the one to Shered's ribs, partly because Cair resolved not to let himself be drawn. Also, not only did Captain Daunce and Anmal the disciplinary officer watch them carefully, but all the other aeriners as well.

During this time, Cair sorted out the passengers. First there was the wizard (or, more formally, philosophont), the bulky woman named Kimmel Ran. Her name indicated that she was from the Western Octrans, but her accent was of Mondisle. Cair learned that she was a true wizard, one of the Trust Committee that controlled Lanter, the great demon that administered Mondisle.

Cair knew that in the big cities, violent crime was rare, for one had only to call out, in Mondisle, "Help, Lanter, ho!" to cause the great force being to materialize a lesser demon from the very air, which would then seize all present for inquiry. The great sophonids, as the demons were properly known, permeated all parts of the cities they administered.

Eless tel-Raunce, the fussy and exquisitely dressed professor, was the second of the passengers; he frequently disputed with Kimmel Ran over their decisions. *Swordbeak* had picked him up on the Morningshore, east of

the Lynetians, then had been caught in the gale that blew it into the Vale of Mahoggin.

On Cair's second day, the professors queried him about the Vale and Mahal Goguelin, having learned that he'd signed on there. He knew little about the Vale's history, to their disgust.

Most striking of the passengers was the Deoman, named, or nicknamed, Gootch. At closer acquaintance, Cair saw that his trademarks were "white" — that is, the tanned color of Cair's own skin; they even had little freckles in them. Partly because of his carnivorous habits, and partly because of his sardonic personality, Cair found Gootch discomforting and avoided him.

Two strong young men completed the party. They looked like stick-at-noughts who'd been barbered, combed, shaved, and neatly dressed. One of these smoothed-down roughs was called Reris. Syconium apparently found him interesting, and sought out his company.

Cair unwisely couched his objection to this in mountain style. "I don't want you hanging around that lout; he's no good," he said.

"Yes, eh?" She cocked an eyebrow. "At least you do not Ho me away from him."

Realizing his error, Cair blundered further: "I don't give you orders, of course. But I just mean — no good can come of it. When a woman goes to flirting with another man —"

He checked at her look. "Oh, so now I am your woman, eh? I think not, ha! I am no mountain wench."

"But Sy —"

"Next you'll be rehearsing Secret Words to bind me to you. No, farm boy, I'm an aeriner. I'm off."

And when they went off-watch, she moved his new sailor's chest from under her bunk to one of the spare ones.

Chisel was delighted, and giped at Cair at supper. Cair's third night aboard was the longest to date, and tormented with agonies of homesickness. Reris started sleeping with Sy next day.

That was the morning they passed over the shore. Glumly, Cair looked down on a rolling, savage forest, broken here by old roads, prosperous steadings, less prosperous ones, abandoned buildings, and glades that once had housed steadings. Farther inland, the forest snarled across the hills, supreme.

Their destination was Ongra, a peninsula between the Silverwater Fosse to the west and the Dour Fosse to the east, two drowned valleys. Word was soon passed that this was not Ongra, but Carcarnta, a peninsula east of Ongra. Captain Daunce took sights on Sun and several moons, especially Polar Moon, and bore up farther to the north.

It all meant nothing to Cair. He was not touched even by the crew's disappointment that their destination was not Kalid at the mouth of the Silverwater, the only real city around.

Reris sank lithely down beside Cair at noon-meal and needled him smoothly: "That Syconium is quite a filly, eh, farm boy? Gives a great ride. Better than your father's volaunts, eh?"

Cair could do nothing but retreat into grim silence. Sy was curt and short with him even when they were alone on the mast, lively and animated around Reris. Zov, the three-breasted woman in the other watch, tried to console Cair. But she was involved with another man, and he was inconsolable in any case.

Cair's gloom did not go unremarked. The captain sent him to the hold to shift the cargo.

Forward of the 'tween decks — the space composing the aftcastle, officers' cabins, various stores lockers, and the galley — was a massive bulkhead. Forward of it was the hold, which rose from the keel up to the top deck. Forward was another massive bulkhead with no doors; forward of that was passenger country.

The construction of the ship became plain to Cair. Halfway along the huge keel were the steps for the masts, great iron saddles and clamps that permitted them to swivel. Overhead to the side were heavy beams on which the masts rested, on massive iron trucks running on tracks along them. These mast rest beams were supported by paired buttresses flying up and out in V shapes from the keel. Cair was constantly stepping over and ducking under them. Under the deck, overhead, tie beams converted each buttress V into a point-down triangle.

The yards were stepped to the keel just below the masts, by means of similar saddles. They passed through the angle between bottom and side of the ship, resting on lesser timbers than those that supported the masts. These yard rests were supported by stanchions dropping from the V buttresses.

Thus, there were two long slits, the working slots, on each side of the

ship, deck and bottom, into the hold. On landing, the yards' working slots on the bottom were closed off by heavy shutters against thieves.

The hull was a superstructure built around the V buttresses and the yard rests. The ship was comprised of the wood of four hundred mature trees, quorks and eo-oaks, skeel and lingam for the hull.

Cair moved casks of pickled opsonium, an ingredient of expensive sauces, into a more balanced formation. The musty, earth-smelling sacks of orchil pods, the red-dye source, he could dispose in any convenient way; they were light in weight. The seven bales of worsted yarns he was to leave strictly alone. Three of them were actually byssus fibers, the shellfish product from which cloth-of-gold was woven — "sea-gold," it was called on the Morningshore.

For two days, Cair labored in a hold gloomy despite the powerful lucent bottles glowing with phosphonid fungus. One whole day, it rained, and they put the slushed canvas waxpaulins over the working slots in the deck. Cair almost didn't notice when the Sun came out again.

That afternoon, word was passed for him, and Cair climbed out of the hold, still sweating, and went to the forecabin. His knock was answered after a lengthy moment by the frowning features of Eless tel-Raunce.

"Oh, it's you, heh. Come below, ho."

Cair followed, outwardly impassive but inwardly puzzled. Gootch the Deoman and his two toughs were aft, at the galley. Below, the professor led him into one of the wide-windowed bow cabins. Kimmel Ran sat here, also frowning up at him.

"Sit down, ho," she said. She moved papers and books about on the small desk. "I'm told you are from the Vale of Mahalwin — what you call Mahoggin — eh?"

After a moment, Cair said, "I'm from the Vale of Mahoggin, heh."

"Ah, then you know about Mahal Goguelin, the philosophont, also born there. They taught you about the Great Rebellion in school, eh?"

"Yes, heh."

"So, what do you know, eh?"

Cair took a moment to collect his thoughts, wondering why she should care so much for someone thirty-five hundred years dead. "The main battle of the Great Rebellion against the Realm of Hanchel was the Battle of the Flowering Fields. Geller was there, and Argabrite, Yecker and Vith, and others. They empowered many tetrons of Lucifexes, each one capable

of tearing out a mountain."

The professor coughed dryly, and Cair hesitated, looked at him.

"You greatly exaggerate the strength of a force-armored man, my boy. But in essence, you are correct; each Lucifex is the equivalent of an army in himself. However, one of the Realm's most important sophonids was not at Flowering Fields. Which one, eh?"

Jaskon, perhaps. But Cair didn't know. He gestured ignorance.

Kimmel Ran snorted. "The answer stares you in the face — Lanter, currently administrating Mondisle. This great sophonid has a curious — indeed, a unique — history. Do you know anything of paleontology, eh?"

Cautiously, Cair said, "This is the Diezoic era; before us was the Cenozoic era in which the man-kin arose; before that the Mesozoic —"

"Quite, quite," said Eless tel-Raunce testily. "Now, direct your mind back to the end of the Cenozoic era, 40 million years after the man-kin first departed the Prime Mondeign for the planets of the distant stars. The birth of the Lynetian Mountains, then, 20 million years ago, signals the break between eras here on the Tanolant continent. There are as dramatic signals on other continents. There is a strong suspicion that these great orogenic events were not natural. They may have been the result of war on a scale we can't comprehend."

Cair's mind reeled at the thought that the Heights of Man, those lucent days, could have witnessed war. He said nothing.

"Certainly Lanter was found in a dormant condition — 'encapsulated' is the sophonid term — in a deep mine in the Fell Slash, west of the Grand Tetons in the Lynetians, nearly a million years ago," said Kimmel Ran.

"A place, we believe, deeply investigated by Mahal Goguelin," said Eless tel-Raunce.

Kimmel Ran gave him a disapproving glance. "Not proven, as well you know. No matter. The known facts are that Lanter did not appear, as expected, at Flowering Fields; the Army of the Aggrieved had at least two tetrons more Lucifexes than the Realm did, and after the Great Compromise, Mahal Goguelin retired to what you call Mahoggin and spent the rest of his years in quiet retirement, ruling the people of the Vale beneficently — people who still wear his trademark. Yes, eh?"

"Yes, heh," said Cair huskily, touching the encircled M characters on his cheekbones.

"Which means that he still retained a link to some sophonid," said the

little professor with a hint of excitement. "Only sophonids can tamper with germ plasm."

"And that sophonid, logically, must be Lanter, ha!" said Kimmel Ran.

Logically, that must be so, but Cair did not find this reasoning as exciting as they did. He looked from one to the other in puzzlement.

Inexplicably, Kimmel Ran picked up a notebook, said, "Intialla! Open the window and jump out, ho!"

Cair thought she'd gone mad.

"Hintinillade! Open the window and jump out, ho!" she said.

Cair looked at Eless tel-Raunce; the professor was as mad as she, staring at him avidly.

Then a terrible thing happened. At Kimmel Ran's third command, Cair felt deep in his bones a desire to obey her every word. Nodding in agreement so strong it needed no other response, he went joyfully to the window and paused to assess the latch. Again came the wrenching call that pulled at every fiber of his conscious and subconscious mind, and he heard and powerfully desired to obey her order canceling the previous command to jump.

Turning inquiringly and almost mindlessly to her, Cair waited for the next command.

Again she pronounced a word that plucked at him so powerfully that he could not hear or remember it, and she said, "Be released from all my compulsions, ho."

In a moment he was quivering with fear and rage. Gootch might well have recoiled from Cair in that moment; he was more savage than any wild beast. But the professors were intent on books and notebooks, and did not notice.

"You have hit it, ha!" said Kimmel Ran. "I wouldn't have guessed he'd have used a known, if ancient, Secret Word—"

"It was probably a tribute to his long association with Lanter," said Eless tel-Raunce. "Sloppy work on his part, but a bit of luck for us, ha."

"Certainly it is a strong indicator. We're on the right track."

Cair recovered, took a breath, scarcely having heard this. They glanced up.

"That's all. Dismissed, ho," said Eless tel-Raunce, and Cair went trembling back to the hold. Slowly moving casks about, he pondered what had happened to him. He was still pondering that night during his watch

below, and later during his trick at the throttles.

Secret Words.

All animals at one time or another had had Secret Words implanted in their germ plasm to keep them under control. Generations in the wild, or too much crossbreeding, could overlay or destroy them. But, man-kin being what it was, most species of men also had Secret Words that could bind them to the will of the wizard who implanted them — or anyone else who knew the word.

So that was what an animal felt, when it was arrested and brought *trembling back from fractiousness* by a Secret Word, Cair thought. He knew that obedience was an instinct in them — that was taught in school — but he'd never had brought home to him that instinct is simply an irresistible emotion.

Not completely irresistible for humans, he had read. A strong-minded person could fight a command, especially a complicated one or one that took time to carry out. But irresistible enough at the moment the word was spoken. Still, it wasn't a thing most people worried about; crossbreeding had destroyed or blurred many Secret Words, and, in any case, most of them were lost in history.

Not, it seemed, in the Vale of Mahoggin. Cair found himself hating Mahal Goguelin with a blind, savage hatred even greater than that he felt for Kimmel Ran. And the professor.

It was not for many hours that he began to wonder why they had tested him to find his Secret Word. Obviously they could control him at any time; but they seemed to have no desire to do so.

No. It was not he they aimed at, but Lanter. Evidently Mahal Goguelin had learned some ancient Secret Word that the great force-being was constrained to obey. Probably he had not been able to do more than stymie Lanter, for it had not appeared on the side of the Army of the Aggrieved. Kimmel Ran could do much more. She knew the spells used to control the terrible being; she served on the Trust Committee that oversaw it. With her knowledge, and the Secret Word, she and Eless tel-Raunce surely meant to seize it — and with it, Mondisle.

Better any death than to let that happen. What had Mahal Goguelin himself said, in his farewell speech? "Do nothing worse than die wantonly." That was it.

At breakfast, Chisel tried another of his gibes, of which all but he had

tired. Cair scarcely heard him, scarcely was aware that Syconium was sitting silently near Reris. Chisel, angry at being so totally ignored, barked at him.

At this, Cair turned slowly and looked at him. Bemused, Cair reflected that Chisel's words now meant nothing; even Sy's defection meant little. Now he knew what troubles were.

At his steady gaze, Chisel was taken aback and fell silent. Shered shifted uncomfortably. The meal was finished in embarrassed silence, but Anmal eyed Cair dubiously.

They were sailing over water, the Silverwater Fosse; about noon they again crossed shoreline, and Ongra lay below them. It was much like Carcarnta, except less inhabited. Shortly the mighty forest gave way to a vast, seething swamp, Squalish. For another couple of hours, they reached across it, then heaved to.

This was a ticklish business, requiring nice adjustments, but finally, with double-reefed sails and continuous trimming of the masts, Captain Daunce achieved it. Meantime, the professors were studying old charts, books, notebooks.

Gootch, Reris, and the third hooligan, Arkon, emerged from the forecabin armed with long rocket-guns; short, spring-powered arrow-guns; swords; axes; knives. Reris paraded expansively before Zov and a rather sullen Syconium. The Bull spat over the rail near Cair.

"Exo-zo-otics down there," he said. "Homo-phages, man-eaters, some of them. They're choosing a dangerous place to take land."

Exozootics. Animals or sagacious beings from the exotic planets of far stars: Cansaspara, Quantique, Thamber, Old Romarth. Gulics, perhaps, or pilinixies. Even as Cair thought thus, there came the chill, wailing cry of a killoon up to them. Not an exozootic, but Cair caught his breath.

The professors paid it no mind. Presently they came to a decision, and *Swordbeak* was put under way again. For an hour they beat back and forth above the trackless swamp, an hour of intense and irritable argument between the professors and kibitzing of Captain Daunce, whose beard assumed a bitter shape, an hour of working the masts and repeatedly going out on the footropes. Then they sighted a great stela, leaning at a precarious angle but still upright, tall as all but the tallest trees. It was a monolith of some white stone with crabbed antique characters inlaid in it in black. Most of these had fallen out. Cair couldn't read the characters.

"A xenolith; it must be the commemorative stone of Coatikrum, ha!" said Kimmel Ran.

"Yes, yes, heh," said Eless tel-Raunce, equally excited. "About a mile northeast of it — if it truly marks the old city center —"

Cair could see no sign of a city. Presently, however, they were above a small hill with trees sprouting from it.

"Let go the sheets, ho!" Captain Daunce cried.

Belowdecks, someone cast off the lines that held the sails to the yards; the canvas ran to and flapped from the masts like blue wash on the line. Captain Daunce coolly took them down till they were in danger of fouling their lines on the trees, then dropped a hook into one.

The ship swung and came creaking to an unstable halt, the wind piling up about it. Cair could feel the ship's fabric trembling with the urge to go crashing through the trees into wreckage.

"Ladder, ho. Cair, Bull, make us fast anigh that knoll, ho. Hands furl sail, ho."

Kimmel Ran and Eless tel-Raunce had been running back and forth across the deck in their excitement, and would have been first over the side, but neither Gootch nor Captain Daunce would permit it. Gootch and Arkon went first, to Captain Daunce's irritation; Cair and the Bull next.

Cair descended panting with excitement into stifling, humid silence. Sweat broke immediately on him as he descended between the trees and stood on the uneven surface in a patch of purple wamble. Cair shivered nervously and looked about. Dead-man's-fist raised its misshapen clubs knee-high; moss hung from above; bracken crushed underfoot. The dimness between the great boles was menacing, but nothing moved except the passengers. Gootch and Arkon peered into the shadows, weapons ready. Above, the professors were descending eagerly.

The hill was a pile of once-squared stones; a vast building, or congeries of buildings. The city built by Mahal Goguelin and other philosophonts thirty-five hundred years ago for their researches into the ruins of the older city. Now the philosophont's city was itself an antique ruin, Cair thought. The somber forest stood tall on and about it; the humid, rotten reek of swamp clung round it.

"Let's move, ho," the Bull muttered. Cair nervously agreed, and they made the ship fast at three points with slipknots. Swarming back up the rope ladder, they carried the ends of the painters back up with them.

Then, nothing. Captain Daunce raised ship and ordered the rail manned; pilinixies could climb the painters, and so could many other creatures. All the passengers spent the night in the swamp, clawing, Cair supposed, at the tumbled rocks.

The lust for power had turned the professors into animals. As for Gootch — Cair thought the silky man-kin far too self-satisfied. No doubt the Deoman knew well enough what was in the wind, and had laid his own plans to take Lanter from the unworldly professors. A far more formidable being than they, and they were too blind to see it. The professors thought of Gootch as hired muscle, nothing more. Certainly not as a man with dreams of power great as theirs.

Two boring days later, about midmorning, Captain Daunce dourly let *Swordbeak* descend to treetop level at a hail from below, and the weary passengers ascended. The professors looked tired but still excited; they gave the order to slip cables and loft, destination Mondisle, to the crew's delight. Gootch was as sleek and catlike as ever. Reris and Arkon looked as if they'd spent the time disgruntled in a steam bath.

"Mondisle, ha!" said the Bull to Cair as they watched the swamp fall a mile below them. "Payoff, a visit to Pandle's, gaming with other ships — we'll have a great time, lad."

Cair grunted and went out on the footrope to shake out the sail bundle against the mast.

That night, off-watch, Cair observed light through the bow windows; the professors, having slept all day, appeared to be up again. The Deoman was eating, on deck; Reris was arguing with Syconium; only Arkon was unaccounted for. It was time. He went silently down the aft ladder and slipped through the door into the hold.

There was no door in the forward bulkhead that would allow the passengers into the hold. But there was a crawl space on either side of the massive keel: the bilges, which ran the length of the ship, under all bulkheads. The bilges of an airship were not particularly noisome; Cair readily crawled under the forward bulkhead and laid his head near the grating that covered the drain forward.

A murmur of voices. Dislodging the grating silently, he maneuvered himself carefully through and replaced it. He was in a linen closet devoted to the needs of the passengers. Here on the lower level of passenger country were a pair of closets, a cubby full of baggage, and a small cabin

occupied by Arkon and Reris. Up the ladder were the more spacious accommodations of the professors and the Deoman. Voices drifted down. Cair ascended cautiously.

He observed a crack of brighter light from the door to the cabin in which the professors had interviewed him. Applying his eye cautiously to the crack, Cair sucked in his breath silently in surprise. Kimmel Ran was in her usual seat, Eless tel-Raunce to one side. On the deck stood a glowing golden creature less than a foot tall. It seemed made of light, too bright to see through, but was obviously immaterial, as the pen passed through its substance.

A demon. Probably a lesser demon materialized by some great sophonid for a simple task.

Even as Cair perceived it, it whipped about in an eyeblink and was facing him, its face froglike but menacing, small though it was.

"Who's there, eh?" Kimmel Ran's sharp tone. "Lanter, seize—"

Cair burst into the room with the manic energy of desperation. The door rebounded noisily, and he was upon her before she could cry out, swinging his great knobbed fist. He felt something give under the impact, perhaps his knuckles, but the woman's head flew back and struck the bulkhead more loudly than the door.

Instantly he had whirled and seized Eless tel-Raunce's throat in his left. The wiry little professor's struggle deflected his aim, but Cair caught him on the cheekbone with his fist. His head, too, flung back and rebounded from the bulkhead.

Cair whirled fearfully to the demon.

It was no larger than before, a glowing golden frog-man hunched on the desk, eyeing him alertly. In an eyeblink movement, it looked down at Kimmel Ran, over at Eless tel-Raunce, back at him.

Kimmel Ran's mouth was a bloody ruin; she'd give no orders to the demon for a while. Eless tel-Raunce was dazed, his eyes unfocused.

Cair panted, looked again at Lanter's lesser demon. He should kill the professors now —

Overhead, he heard hurried footsteps. Kimmel Ran stirred weakly on the floor. Cair damned the gambler's Three Fathers: Yes, No, Maybe. The short one, No, had come top.

Or was it Maybe? He looked back at the demon and said, "Lanter, go, ho! They mean to seize control of you, huh. Disregard all their commands, ho!"

The door to the cabin opened above, and he heard Arkon's voice. "I don't care what they said; I'm going down, ha. I heard something —"

Eless tel-Raunce moaned, half-conscious. Cair could wait no longer. He ducked out, glancing back: the demon still looked at him. Closing the door, he leaped for the ladder, made it down without being seen by the rough. Panting, he quietly raised the grating in the linen closet and slid down into the crawl space feet first. Carefully, he lowered the grating into place.

Now he was upside down and backward, but he squirmed over as he backed along the keel and, despite the need for quietness, made good time to the bulkhead. Thankfully, he wriggled out of the crawl space into the hold and instantly ran for the aftcastle. All seemed quiet when he peered cautiously into the room; no one was about, except Shered studying his navigation. Cair slipped unseen into his bunk and tried to pretend he'd been there for hours. No doubt he'd mucked everything up. He couldn't hope he had undone their control.

The Bull presently came down and said, "Cair, hey. You're wanted on deck."

"Cair, yo," he said, and followed.

Professor Eless tel-Raunce was red with rage, his cheek bruised; Kimmel Ran's lower face was swathed with a bandage, but her eye was murderous. Gootch the Deoman eyed Cair speculatively. Lanter was nowhere to be seen.

Captain Daunce confronted him, calm but wary. "The passengers say you intruded into their cabins and struck them. How say you, eh?"

Cair had had time to consider his reply. He had found a thing more important than his life, he knew. "Captain, they are attempting to seize control of Lanter with Mahal Goguelin's old Secret Word, and mean to tyrannize over us all. I saw Lanter's demon in her cabin —"

"That's enough, ha! Gootch, throw him over the side, ho," said Eless tel-Raunce, no more testily than if the tea were cold.

The Deoman grinned and came on lazily, like a great black cat, a sableynx.

"Hold, ho!" said Captain Daunce. "I give the orders here, ha! Professor, what did—" His speech ended in a scream; the captain flung himself to the deck, his white beard flying.

Gootch elevated his hand, grinning tightly; in it was a glowing object,

some million-year-old High Mondeign weapon dug out of Chance knew what ancient ruin — Cair was already running as the realization came.

"Reris, Arkon, head him off, ho," said the Deoman. "Pin him against the rail."

Cair paused, backed against the rail above a mile of pitch-blackness. He looked left and right at the two roughs. Abruptly, the Bull bellowed like a bursus and thundered past the shakily rising captain, toward Gootch. The Deoman whipped his fiery weapon round, and the Bull went down, screaming hoarsely, and flopped about.

The roughs were distracted for the necessary moment; Cair erupted against Arkon like surf against a cliff, flung him aside, and leaped. For a moment the mast loomed before him; then he was falling into inky blackness.

He had jumped through the port mast's working slot into the hold. Sacks of orchil broke his fall; panting, he scrambled over casks into the darkness of the hold, caught up a barrel stave. The first one down after him would die with a crushed skull. Above, he heard outcries, running feet, a scream. It quickly subsided, and Cair stood ready, peering up, wondering who had won.

The sound of a body striking sacks, the raw brown odor of crushed orchil. Someone had jumped down through the other working slot, behind him. Blaspheming Chance, he whirled, but Chisel's voice came: "Cair, hey! It's me, ha!"

Another impact, and Syconium's voice: "Cair, hey! Ouch, damn the Chance!"

"Cair, yo," he said. "What's aloft, eh?"

"The Chance-damned passengers have taken over the ship, heh!"

"Yes, heh, they've seized the Captain Daunce and Anmal — that cannibal Deoman is on his way down with his nerve-whip, ha!"

"The Bull, eh?"

"Helpless from the sting when last I saw him, heh," said Chisel. "What do we do now, sir, eh?"

Light glared down the slit they had jumped through, the shadows of the V-buttresses jumping to life. Reris dropped down, followed by Gootch, his sharp white teeth gleaming; Arkon held a lucent bottle above.

"Run, ha!" said Cair, and scrambled over casks. For a moment he dithered; they couldn't move fast while scrambling over V-buttresses.

Reris had maneuvered between them and the door to the 'tween decks.

"Out on the yard, ha," said Chisel.

In the instant, Cair was out the lower working slot, feet on the footrope and making good time down the steeply slanting yard. Overhead, the great sail bellied, taut, the sheets that held it to the yard and ran back to the ship, getting in his way. Chisel followed, panting; Sy was right behind him. Below, all was profound darkness; Cair had no idea if they were sailing over the savage forest of Ongra or if the Heartwaters rolled a mile below them.

Pursuit was unexpectedly slow; not till light gleamed through the slit above them did Cair realize how effective a barrier the casks and the darkness of the hold had made. Then Gootch's eager dark head was revealed, lofting a lucent bottle with one hand, the nerve-whip glowing in the other. Cair redoubled his speed, as did the others.

Syconium screamed; Chisel cried out in agony; Cair felt a sharp tingle all through his body. He clamped onto the yard, quivering. The footrope jerked; he saw Chisel fall, and realized that Sy had fallen also. They just managed to catch the footrope and turned agonized looks up at him, faintly seen in the dim glow from the lucent bottle above.

His whole body crawling from anticipation of the stinging blow that would send him, too, off the yard, Cair scrambled up the sloping rope and reached down to seize Chisel's hand. With a convulsive heave on both their parts, they almost got the man back on the yard, when the second blow fell. Again, it largely missed Cair. Chisel fell again, almost taking Cair with him. As they froze helpless in precarious balance, they heard Syconium's despairing screams.

She jerked and fell, turning one last unfathomable look upon Cair, who had failed her, and vanished in darkness. Tears already beginning to stream, Cair heaved again on the paralyzed Chisel, got him back upon the footrope with one arm draped over the yard, but could do no more for him till the paralysis ended.

The lucent bottle still glowed coldly, and another, held by Reris. But the nerve-whip did not. Perhaps it had temporarily exhausted its supply of force. The next sting would take them both off.

"I'm going on down," Cair said. "I'll see if I can climb the boltrope."

"I'll — follow — when — I can," gasped Chisel. "May — the — Long Father — be — with you." Toss-sticks was played with sticks of three

lengths: Yes, Maybe, and No. Yes was the Long Father.

"And you, ha," Cair said, and sloped down the yard as rapidly as he could. Presently he reached its end; the sail, barely sensed in the darkness, ended at his right hand. Lashed to the leech of the sail was the boltrope, which stiffened it against tearing, and also had, at intervals, loops to which braces were fastened for further strength.

This rope had been slushed in the past and was waxy, and it was not very big around. Cair had great strength in his hands, and his toes were deft, but it was a daunting climb. He swarmed up the boltrope rapidly at first, then more slowly. If they let go the sheets and let the sail flog, he would die. Presently his toes began to cramp. After a while he saw that the light at the yard's slit was gone. He hoped Chisel was following him, but he knew how unlikely that was.

Then he ceased to think about Chisel, about Gootch; even Sy faded from his mind. All that remained was the agony of effort on the yielding sail, with death and darkness all around.

When his hands found the top of the sail and the mast, Cair was at first too stunned to know how to respond. Then he painfully pulled himself up and sat astride the mast to rest. Time passed; his hearts slowed; his toes ceased to cramp. His mind remained a comforting blank until a glow of golden light recalled him. The demon face of Lanter appeared, small as his thumbnail. It looked at him while he gasped for breath, then it vanished.

After a moment he realized that the wizard had used the sophonid to find him. Still, he could do nothing but work his way back along the mast and hope to defeat them. And to his surprise, he found that they were not expecting him.

Over the deck, Cair climbed up on the mast and took the lay of the land. The Deoman dominated the deck with his glowing weapon, his expression that of a man rolling fine old brandy over his tongue. None dared to resist, not even the Bull. Sullenly, all obeyed his orders, including, Cair saw, Eless tel-Raunce and Kimmel Ran. The latter huddled against the rail, her mouth still wrapped. All the crew was there, except for Syconium — and Chisel.

"We will take up the subject of Secret Words later," Gootch was saying

negligently to the professors. "For now, all your notes and papers —"

Reris pointed to Cair on the mast and cried out. Despairing, Cair leaped, hopelessly trying to close with Gootch before the other could sting him. The big man-kin spun about, and there was a flash.

Cair felt nothing.

Gootch looked shocked; everyone on the deck cried out in awe. Exultant that he was still able to move, Cair leaped upon the Deoman and seized him.

Gootch came apart bloodily in his hands as if the man-kin were a well-roasted fowl. Dumbfounded, Cair looked down at the ruin he'd made of the man, at the blood pouring untouched off him. Then, still furious, he pounced upon Arkon, swinging a fist in a tremendous blow that crushed and tore his head off. Reris had disappeared; Cair turned on Eless tel-Raunce and flung him screaming far out into the night. But his rush had carried him too far; he crashed through the rail as if it were flimsy reeds, and stood braced on empty air.

Gasping, he looked about. Pale light washed over the blue sail near him; the deck was studded with gaping faces and open mouths. Cair looked down at his body. It glowed palely, as if he had been brushed all over with a phosphonid solution.

Inconsequentially, he was reminded of the glowing balloons that they were wont to loose at Ballyhoggin on Midsummer's Fest, the tide of glowing balls spilling through the plaza. He had a sudden compelling memory of small boys bursting the balloons, running with glowing faces, hair, hands, laughing, smearing light on each other, laughing, laughing. . . .

He was armored in force — he was a Lucifex, undoubtedly powered by Lanter. The Trust Committee was aware of Kimmel Ran's crime and had chosen him to end the matter. With a bound, he returned to the deck. Kimmel Ran was kneeling, hands upraised, moaning what must be a plea for mercy. But she knew too much. Cair seized her, threw her overboard.

For a moment he wondered if it was into water or forest.

He stood uncertainly for a moment. Then he said, "It is accomplished, huh. All the conspirators with dangerous knowledge are dead, huh."

The glow about him died. Cair turned, saw the pale faces and staring eyes of the crew; saw the pile of bloody meat and entrails that was all that

remained of Gootch and Deoman. He staggered to the rail, narrowly missing the broken gap, and vomited into the night. In the midst of this, he began to weep.

He felt the Bull's huge hands on his shoulders; Zov brought a basin of water and some cotton waste. "Thank you," he muttered to them all. Someone had thrown a waxpaulin over the Deoman. Captain Daunce approached gravely.

The glowing simulacra of several men and women appeared on the deck before Cair. Their leader bowed. "You have the thanks of the Nation of Hanchel, young sir. What ship is this, that we may reward you, eh?"

"Free ship *Swordbeak*, Captain Daunce, heh," Cair said, and gestured.

Captain Daunce bowed. And, beneath all the shock and horror, Cair saw a hint of shrewdness in the wrinkles about the old man's eyes.

Swordbeak hove to, but was unable to stop over the manse. Cair said, "No matter; the Lazy Brook will suffice." He struck fists and made his farewells all around, to the Bull last, and ceremonially up into the sky to Syconium and Chisel. Then, without delay, he went over the side with his sailor's chest on his shoulder, heavy with his share of the reward, one-thirty-second. *Swordbeak* lofted immediately, and he stood waving till the air took the sails; then he turned and tripped.

Strange Chance, he thought, bemused. It was his fishing pole in the long grass. He picked it up and made for the footbridge over the Lazy Brook.

"Look, ha!" came an awed voice from the bank of the stream. Cair saw his younger brother Onndil and his cousin Mervine peering at him where they'd been fishing. He looked at them, feeling that he'd been gone a thousand years, while they'd lived only a couple of tetrons of days.

They stared, awed, into his expression. "It's Og Oogleby, come to life, ha!" Mervine said.

Cair would have smiled, but he was too empty. He looked away, passed them by, and walked toward the manse. He wondered if Jethil would be there.



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BOOKS

A L G I S B U D R Y S

Storeys From The Old Hotel, Gene Wolfe, Tor, \$21.95

Contemporary Authors, Autobiography Series, Volume 14, Gale Research Company

The Science-Fantasy Publishers, Chalker and Owings, Eds. Mirage Press. \$75.00

Courting Disasters and Other Strange Affinities, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Wildside Press

GENE WOLFE is, by most accounts including mine, one of the top SF writers living today. Certainly there is no one working his side of the street. Avram Davidson has something of the same love for words *qua* words, as do some of the rest of us, but Avram does not quite work toward the same ends, and neither do the rest of us. One can, and one occasionally does, in other words, name other writers who are at the top of the profession. But we are then naming individual talents,

doing things no one else does . . . quite likely because no one else, including the other top writers, can do them as well.

He is not perfect . . . witness *Castlevue*. But who else would have attempted *Castlevue* in the first place, and who else would have given the individual scenes so much power. Who else would have known how?

So we are dealing with genius. [I may be on a series of columns about the geniuses in our field. I may not; we'll see.] At any rate, the point of genius is not that it delivers a complete work of art in every case. It is that in every case it attempts a work of art, and even when it fails — which it does, from time to time — the failure is nevertheless more interesting, more instructive, more seminal, than a perfect piece of craftsmanship, which “merely” entertains.

This is a tricky point, so we'll go over it.

First of all, the overwhelming number of SF books published each year is dreck. It exists for the most

part because there are publishing schedules, and this is deemed to be the best available that month. Perhaps it is.

Then, there are craftsmanly books, written by male and female authors who see the shape of the finished object clear before them, hammer and polish until the thing is complete, and, if they be good craftsmen, what this delivers to the reader is a pleasurable, sometimes thrilling experience whose only fault is that it breaks no new ground.

And then there are the artists. These constitute a mere handful at any given time — Ellen Kushner, Esther Friesner, William Gibson, Lucius Shepard, Tim Powers, etc., to name only some of the “newer” additions to those ranks — and their primary mission is to work around the expanding edge of our field, finding new things for it to do. It is not surprising that once in a while the exploration is not complete even in the sense of being able to sustain itself for the length of time it takes to read the book. Picture a scaffolding edging out over a bottomless pit, and then houses and streets laid out on that scaffolding, and then additional anchors piercing down through the structure — anchors which typically are placed not by the artist but by those who follow after him. In this

way, the gains are consolidated, and anyone at all may walk out on what is now solid ground. But the artist is busy erecting new scaffolding, on the new edge.

Sometimes the scaffolding collapses. Sometimes it's for lack of anchors driven in along the previous subdivision by tardy followers. Sometimes, simply, the artist has plunged ahead without considering all the factors. But it is not much in her or his nature to construct on safe ground; if it were, he or she would be a craftsman. So failure is a part of being an artist. It is not so with craftsmen. As for the dreckies, it doesn't matter, because they don't have real success, either. They just litter the ground.

An artist can work in a variety of ways — in fact, an infinite variety. It is in fact to be expected of him or her; he or she is driven to it. And he or she will succeed or fail, in the eyes of others, in part through how comprehensible this choice is to others . . . which may, in fact, prove to be a failure on the part of the others, not of the artist, and may be redressed years later by a re-estimation on the part of others, much good may it do the long-dead artist. For the craftsman it is simpler; the craftsman is judged by success or failure on the basis of precedent, and the final verdict is handed in immediately.

But the artist does not actually succeed or fail. In a sense, she or he never fails. She or he is on a lifelong exploration, with some turns of the maze more productive than others, but with the same tools of exploration being deployed at all times. The only failure is to overlook something . . . to be blinded to it by an improper use of tools.*

There is no failure in the work produced, because every word of that is describing something hitherto unheard of. It is just, as I've said before, that sometimes this description is less felicitous than it is at others . . . or so it seems at the time, and *perhaps* accurately.

Which brings us, smoothly, to the consideration of Gene Wolfe's *Storeys From the Old Hotel*, a short story collection.

It is interesting because it contains a great number of stories, most of them, obviously, quite short. It is also interesting because the earliest of these dates from 1967 or perhaps even earlier, and while quite a few have copyright dates ranging around 1987 or so, by some margin most of them are from the 1970s. And it makes no whit of difference; the earliest of them is as

"modern" as the latest; they come from one hand, or rather one perception of the universe, and except perhaps for some improvement in technique over the years, they are as one in that respect. They differ from the novels only in that Wolfe frequently lets his essential playfulness show in them, whereas he is more careful with it in his novels. Even so, it is all one man — and if you think by "playfulness" I mean "heedlessness" or "a relaxation of standards" or something, you and I are in for a long afternoon.

Well, look — some of them are not strictly speaking stories at all, as witness "Parkroads — a review," which I recommend to all readers of such film critics as strive to follow after Harlan Ellison. Or "Sightings at Twin Mounds," which again is probably not a story, but which . . . well, never mind.

The main point of reading this book (which I urgently recommend) is that it will entertain the dickens out of you . . . and not always playfully, either. That is, to make myself clear, the main point of any book, no matter who or what by. But for those of us with an additional interest in genius, or with the boundaries of our field, or both, or at least both, this is also not a book to be missed. It is a slice through the perceptions of Gene Wolfe, and what it shows me and possibly you

* But that is a different class of failure — fatal, in the end, but everything is fatal in the end.

— is how various he is in detail, and how homogenous in fact.

Those of you interested in going to libraries might — I say might — do worse than to go to the reference room and there look up Volume 14 of the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* from Gale Research, Inc. In it you will find my autobiography, about 10,000 words thereof, replete with shocking photographs and hilarious incident, all true. You will also find a Doris Lessing autobiography in the same place, although be warned it is cobbled together from two magazine pieces, largely about her mother and mentioning her writing hardly at all.

This series of books has, in the past, contained quite a few SF authors as autobiographers — Gene Wolfe, for one. So if you are looking for information about these people, this is a *primary* source, free of Moscovitticisms. It is not free of error, some of it quite deliberate, of course. Every one of these people must have found some anecdote of their lives which they could not resist recasting. But at the very least these selections contain the *agreed-upon* truth, which is something.

As I hinted, there are 13 books preceding this one, and others to follow. Each is about 415 pages

long, 8½ by 11, and you will therefore find a wealth of material in them. If your library doesn't have them, set up a clamor.

The other day — well, the other week — Pulphouse Publishing delivered to my desk a copy of *The Science-Fantasy Publishers, A Critical and Bibliographic History*, by Jack L. Chalker and Mark Owings, Third Edition Revised and Enlarged. It costs \$75, according to Dean Wesley Smith, publisher of Pulphouse and occasional printing contractor. (He wishes to make clear that while Pulphouse did the printing and shipping, all errors and idiosyncrasies are the responsibility of The Mirage Press, Inc., P.O. Box 1689, Westminster, MD 21158, the actual source of the text and the money with which to print it. I don't know what all of this means, but the book came with an additional eight pages of errata and addenda, already, so we can expect a Fourth Edition at some time, I'm sure.

What it is is a listing of all the specialty houses there have ever been (the overwhelming majority of them, certainly) together with all the books they have done (same *caveat*), and some remarks on the enterprise (personal, not always right as to fact, but usually quite interesting).

Now, as for "not always right as

to fact," the fact is that in the few references where I have some knowledge, there are cases where Chalker and Owings get it wrong. Notably, in their writeup of Pulphouse. But to say that is not to say that I, or anyone else, could have done better. In fact, the odds are overwhelming that no one else could. This is a work of massive scholarship, dedicated not to making money — surely Chalker is not making money on this — but to nailing down an array of facts about something important that will vanish in large part into unremembered history if it were not for Chalker and Owings. If there are errors, well, there are also pages of errata and addenda.

My hat is off to Mirage Press, and Pulphouse for printing and shipping it, and the book is going into my permanent reference library.

Courting Disasters and Other Strange Affinities, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, is another short story collection by this gifted and enigmatic author. Unlike her earlier collection, *Legacy of Fire*, from Pulphouse, this one is from Wildside Press, 37 Fillmore Street, Newark, NJ 07105. You will have to apply to them for the price. I got my copy of the book from Hoffman, and since it was a gift, I couldn't very well ask her.

Unlike the earlier collection,

this one covers more ground. It does not generally confine itself to stories of maltreated children — although, as I more or less said in reviewing it, you would be surprised at how much this basic story can vary from example to example. At any rate, in *Courting Disasters* we range out farther, from "Voices in A Shelter Home" to "Rumors of Greatness," in which a child is not maltreated. "Voices," for instance, is about the former inmate of a now former shelter for battered wives, and of what consequences follow when she is all unknowing brought to the same house by a new man. Undt so weiter.

I recommend you get this book; it's very good, and it will entertain you, and the chances are you will not find these stories in another handy form. Now then — is Nina Hoffman a genius?

Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. She is in many ways a private genius, having written at least seven novels she has not submitted for publication, but which are very good. Her public reputation, which is not widespread enough, is based on her short fiction, which within the compass she has chosen, is marvelous.

She is a person of many talents, not the least of which is to be multifarious in music, living — as Kristine Kathryn Rusch says in her introduction — in a house of delight-

ful complexity and freedom. It does contain at least one piano, guitar, and fiddle, on which she performs at a professional level, while singing on the same level. And there are dolls everywhere, in all sizes, including Life.

She does the same with everything; her car, for instance, crawls with figurines upon the dash. You would expect them to tumble about with every corner she takes, but they do not. Since they are apparently just dime-store figurines, it is difficult to tell how she manages that. But she does.

Now, lots of people in and out of SF fool around with music, and some of them are not shy in inflicting it on you. But there is a qualitative difference between that and being able to do it professionally. One sure way to tell is that only

under special circumstances will you get Hoffman to perform for you. Just as she has seven novels ready to go at any moment, but she has yet to decide they are ready. And no one who has read them knows what factor it is that keeps them home instead of weaving down the street where it would seem to her friends they belong. But that's Nina.

And we should be grateful to her, as we are grateful to Gene Wolfe and a score of other people who don't just write, they explore. God knows what they explore, some of the time; what litter they leave behind, for instance — would a sane man disturb it? It might actually be a work of art, waiting to be shipped to some address we cannot read.



Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Sarah Canary, Karen Joy Fowler
(Henry Holt & Co., cloth, 290pp,
\$21.95)

KAREN JOY Fowler has long been one of our premier writers of sf short stories, but her first novel would be hard to label as science fiction and fantasy by any of the standard rules. Which is fine — Fowler has always had the ability to write language and manipulate symbols in a way that warms the cockles of the academic heart. And even in *Sarah Canary*, which breathes not a hint of Fowler's science fiction roots anywhere in the jacket copy, there is a pervading aura of strangeness that is — while never, strictly speaking, fantasy — nevertheless phantastic.

The story begins with, and generally centers around, a youngish Chinese man named Chin, an immigrant to America in the years just after the Civil War, who has found the dream to be something of a nightmare. Still, it is one that he can live with, can make sense of, until the most incredibly ugly

woman he has ever seen shows up at the edge of the camp where he's working in western Washington, and Chin, somehow, becomes the one who must lead her to the insane asylum she must have escaped from.

She won't talk — at least, not in a way that makes any sense — and when he tries to use force to silence her meaningless babble in order to keep them safe, he finds (or does he?) that she is not as defenseless as she seemed. In fact, he quickly winds up in jail, where his only escape route is to become the executioner of an Indian whose fellow tribesmen wouldn't take kindly to it if an Anglo did the deed. And almost at once Chin has to kidnap Sarah Canary from the insane asylum, for she is clearly safer in the real world than in that mad place.

Because this is a mainstream novel, of course, it is dripping with symbols and contemporary social commentary. It skirts the borders of doctrinaire feminism without quite becoming predictable, and, of

course, it also has long stretches where you wonder what in the world is actually going on and why you are reading it and whether anything will ever be clear. This is, of course, the means whereby the academic-literary community knows that the author is one of their own. But Fowler was herself a storyteller before she "got it" politically and academically, and so the story *does* get somewhere, it *does* make sense, and it *does* reward you, ultimately, for caring about her characters. She is not faking strangeness by being deliberately obscure, she is doing the real thing; and, as she has always done with science fiction, she is subverting the tradition she is writing in even as she satisfies its expectations.

Sarah Canary is not a "fun read." But it is a remarkable story all the same, with unforgettable experiences in it and an alien viewpoint that is just as satisfying when the alien is a Chinese looking at America as when it's a creature with an odd number of appendages looking at humanity. And Fowler's irrepressible sense of humor shows up often in these pages, sometimes as satire and sometimes, I think, in sheer delight.

I recently got a letter from an irate fan who informed me he had destroyed a book of mine because it put memories and ideas in his mind

that he could not stop thinking about, and he loathed that — after all, he said, science fiction was *for escape* and, apparently, nothing else. (Chillingly, he added that he hoped destroying the book would be "enough" — and you wonder why authors get unlisted numbers.) Well, I can't imagine what he'd do if he ever read *Sarah Canary*, but I'm sure we'd read about it in the papers. Let me promise you: Fowler will put images in your mind that you can't forget, and her version of 19th-century America may well reshape the lens through which you view this nation from now on.

King of the Dead, R.A. MacAvoy
(Morrow, cloth, 286pp, \$19.00)

When the first volume of this trilogy came out, I wrote of it that if she kept up "this level of storytelling, then MacAvoy will have added a new literary work to a shelf that is still not overcrowded: *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Book of the New Sun*, *The Once and Future King*, *Helliconia*." In one sense, this second volume shows that she *has* kept up exactly the same level of storytelling; in the sense I intended, however, that is exactly the reason why she *has not*.

Lest I be accused of having committed paradox at an innocent author's expense, let me explain.

What makes Great Works great is a continuing sense of enlargement throughout the work. All of the books cited above begin with a small and personal story, but by the end are the story of a larger world. The tales are still woven with the threads of individual lives, but those lives enlarge with the fabric they create. Their greatness is as much from the greatness of the whole as from individual largeness.

The first volume, *Lens of the World*, had a small and personal beginning which grew to take place on a much larger stage by the end of the book. The characters were still real and compelling as individuals, but they also had become interwoven with great events, with powerful tribes and nations, with jealous and intricate families. This, along with the brilliance of the storytelling and the wisdom of the storyteller, promised that we had a Great Work in progress here.

My disappointment with *King of the Dead*, then, is only relative. This book is at exactly the same level as the end of *Lens of the World*. Alas, it barely rises above that level. One might fear that the limit of MacAvoy's ambition, if not of her vision, has already been reached. Unless the third volume vaults ahead, refusing to be as modest as this second one, my initial assessment will turn out to

have been overgrand.

But that is my problem, not MacAvoy's. She didn't tell me to assume too much about her intentions; all she did was write a fine volume that stirred me and many other readers, both in mind and heart. And I'm glad to tell you that *King of the Dead* is every bit as stirring; it is quite absurd of me to be saying, "Oh, too bad, this book is only just as good as its excellent predecessor." Most of the time when writers create a conflicted love between two characters, as between Nazhuret (the title character) and Arlin (his dangerous lady who prefers to pass through the world being taken for a man), the resolution of their love is the end of all that was interesting about them. MacAvoy, however, manages to make them continually fascinating — a study in marriage (formal or not) between heroes. Most of the time when writers develop characters who have nearly superhuman ability, they have to keep inventing supernatural obstacles for them to overcome (e.g. kryptonite). MacAvoy, however, has left them sensible of their human limitations — they are heroes, not gods — and the dangers that beset them are as real as the possibility of failure.

The one weakness in this book, considered only for itself, is the out-of-a-hat nick-of-time ending,

where the heroes' teacher, Powl, slips back into the story right at the end to bring about a pat resolution whose most interesting scenes all took place offstage. Indeed, MacAvoy comes perilously close to the infuriating ending of Stephen King's *The Stand*, in which, after billions of pages in which we cared very much about the struggles of some fascinating characters, all their struggles end up completely meaningless because the problem is solved effortlessly by the Finger of God. I sincerely hope that MacAvoy will not resort to having Powl pull all the irons out of the fire at the last minute again. I also hope the "bad guys" never again turn out to be an obscure group of malicious rebels whom we never met or even heard of with any certainty until they were exposed within fifteen pages of the end.

Quibbling, all of this, compared to the overall effect of the tale. The encounter with the dangerous nomads of the desert land between nations; the portentous earthquake just as they meet the enemy king; the journey through the temple of the foreign religion; the marvelous machines made by the king's brilliant slave — this is the level of creation that makes MacAvoy one of our most imaginative and well-beloved fantasists.

And a further word to those of

you who shrink from reading a "second volume" of a series: I deliberately do *not* re-read previous volumes when I pick up sequels to review them, precisely because I want to be able to report on how well the new volume stands alone. *King of the Dead* does very well indeed by this standard, and while you will want to read *Lens of the World* eventually, I'm sure, this book is completely self-contained. Perhaps the *Lens of the World* trilogy will not end up being a Great Work after all; perhaps it will end up being merely a brilliant one. No one will need to shed any tears over that, I think.

Stranger Suns, George Zebrowski
(Bantam Spectra, paper, 310pp, \$4.50)

Zebrowski is not what you'd call a character man. His characters have memories the way businessmen have ties, and most of the time you could take the dialogue out of one character's mouth, put it in another's, and it wouldn't make a speck of difference. Which is fine — they mostly exist to explain things to each other, anyway.

Nor is Zebrowski what you'd call a storyteller, if by "story" you mean events that logically flow from one to another in such a way that you want very much to find out

what happens next. It doesn't take long before you realize that "what happens next" is whatever it takes to get us to Zebrowski's next Nifty Concept.

But those concepts: Zebrowski gets ideas the way my lawn gets chickweed: thick and fast and going every which way. Reading *Stranger Suns* is like sitting down in the parlor with H.G. Wells on speed. If your average good solid hard-sf novel has, say, five Nifty Concepts, and a Bruce Sterling novel has, say, a hundred of them, then Zebrowski's going to have five hundred that you notice, and he's going to refer back to other ideas in other novels (his own or not) with tag lines and code words as if you and he had already been talking for six hours before you picked up his book so you could be expected to know what he means.

Which can be frustrating, of course, if you can't let go of your ordinary fictional expectations. If you can, though, this is an exhilarating roller-coaster ride over the whole carnival of cosmic sci-fi. You're hanging upside down over everything . . . the blood may be rushing to your head, but you can see it *all*.

Of course, you may notice that I haven't recounted much of what actually happens in this book. That's because to do so with any

degree of precision would take exactly as long as the book. But here's a glimmer: A tachyon detector in space, perhaps the last "pure science" project an impoverished Earth is going to support for a long time, does find tachyons — but they emanate, not from space, but from the Antarctic. One page later, you find yourself at the excavation in the ice, and in a couple more pages this huge artifact is discovered and four scientists — not the ones anyone would have *chosen* for such a role — are trapped inside when it takes off into space. There are no controls in the spaceship, and they visit a bunch of places and speculate a lot before they've pretty much thought up everything about how the ship works and why they've been visiting these places. They bury one of the guys on the bare desert world where he bought the farm, and you get the idea that Zebrowski expects you to be kind of touched when a chapter ends this way:

"Juan looked at Lena, then at Malachi as they knelt under the low branches, wishing that Magnus might have perished through some mistake of his own, not by chance. 'Magnus,' he said, 'we'll do it for you — everything you might have wanted to learn. We'll try to understand as you would have.'"

Then they get back to Earth, dig

their way out of an under-the-jungle transmat station, and find Magnus quite alive — in *this* version of Earth he wasn't with them in the starship. So not only do we have two kinds of interstellar flight, but also we have alternate universes and doorways leading into a billion possible places... and we're not yet a third of the way through the book. Sometimes things happen so fast you want to laugh, as if you were watching a speeded-up tape of Dan Quayle or Ted Kennedy doing an interview.

But even as the characters magically come up with instantly-certain explanations for the most far-fetched ideas, you can't help but *love it*. The sheer rhythm, the fleet-ing wave-forms in this turbulent stream of intelligence give music to it, and you soon find your own mind dancing along. Not for one moment do you get the idea that Zebrowski is talking down to you; rather he expects you to keep up with him, and if you don't, well, that's not his problem. He's made it as clear as he can and he's not going to explain it *twice* just for you. And if you stay with him to the end, there's no vast clear understanding of everything — the flow just calms down and finally stops. But the ride! Such a treacherous river, and you with nothing but the tiny little rubber raft of your own mind to

keep you afloat...

For a lot of you, this will seem to be a killer review. I've described a book that you would truly loathe. But a good number of you may read this review and think, Here's science fiction as it ought to be. Forget all that art stuff and all that story stuff and all that people stuff and let me see a thousand different views of how the universe works at every level! And please, let it be intelligently written, with energy and passion instead of that bloodless more-scholarly-than-thou stuff in the science journals!

Well, if that's your take on what I've described, be assured: You are George Zebrowski's natural audience, and *Stranger Suns* is the book you've been waiting for.

Bad: Or, the Dumbing of America, Paul Fussell (Summit, cloth, 201pp, \$19.00)

A couple of years ago I read and enjoyed Fussell's book *Class*. It was written with a sneer, but it also had a lot of perceptive observations, and it wasn't until near the end that Fussell revealed his own class, the one he admired most because he and all his friends are in it: The class of academics who are thoroughly but tattily within the middle class, while having such a lofty opinion of themselves that they

have nothing but contempt for their own class and a sort of pathetic adulation for the things that only the rich can afford but rarely have the sense to acquire. A class poisoned by envy and resentful of its own impotence in the larger scheme of things — the class that, with some blessed exceptions, is teaching literature to the college students of America and, where possible, enduing their students with that same contempt for all things American about America and democratic about democracy. In short, the one social group I have ever encountered that is utterly without generosity of spirit.

I have spent many fruitless hours in the company of people like Paul Fussell, naively arguing with them until I discovered that there is no point in it — they never listen in order to understand your point of view, they only listen like high school debaters, until they can catch you in what *seems* to be a contradiction, or until you say something that they can make seem ridiculous enough that you will, cowed, accept their view of Everything.

In *Class*, that particular view consumed only one smug little chapter toward the end; in *Bad*, it consumes the entire book. It takes a few chapters before you realize that Fussell really does hate everything, and with equal scorn. He is a

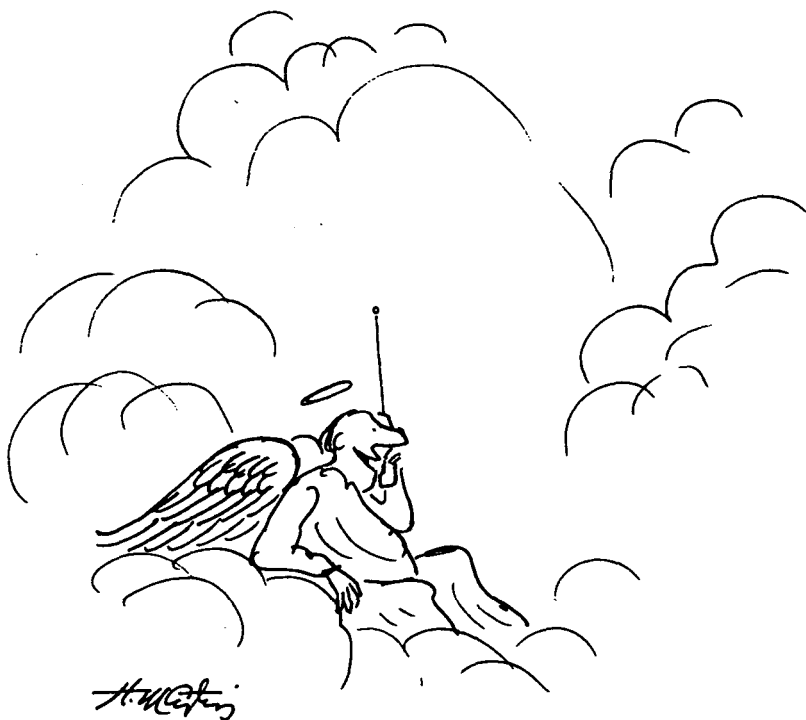
bigot of the worst sort — the kind that fancies itself to be quite urbane and sophisticated. And through all of this, he radiates his fond belief that *he*, unlike the rest of us, talks about ideas instead of people, substance instead of ephemera. He has not noticed — perhaps is incapable of noticing — that what he thinks are ideas almost never rise above the level of *attitudes*, and all his attitudes seem to come out of a jar of rat poison. Surely his heart, like almost every human heart, has had moments of tenderness, of reverence, of fear, of awe, of uncertainty. But he would rather die than let anyone see him be so . . . so common.

He is the epitome of the terrified snob-critic that William Goldman described in his book *The Season* — the critic who can't bear to admit that he likes anything, lest someone with a yet-more-polished sneer look down his nose at him and say, in feigned astonishment, "So *that's* what you like?"

Nevertheless, I recommend this book very highly. To any of you who have been embarrassed or hurt or confused when someone of supposed intellectual standing dismissed the entire genre of science fiction as being worthless, stupid, *bad*, I offer Fussell's new book as a thorough guide into the kind of mind that reaches such sweepingly

ignorant conclusions and then propounds them as gospel. Bad is the testament of those of whom Pope wrote, "A little learning is a danger-

ous thing." A healthy dose of it should inoculate you against taking these people seriously ever again.



"You'll never guess who this is. No, guess again. No . . ."

Last year, Terry Bisson won the Hugo, Nebula and Theodore Sturgeon Award for his short story, "Bears Discover Fire." He has written four novels, including the off-beat, winsome TALKING MAN (which was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award). His most recent book, VOYAGE TO THE RED PLANET, is a science fiction adventure novel unlike any other.

"Next" is one of a series of dialogue stories that Terry has been working on. (The first to see print was the acclaimed "They're Made Out of Meat" which Omni published last year.) In a few short pages, "Next" manages to be a cautionary tale, as well as a treatise on human nature.

Next

By Terry Bisson

NEXT!"

"We want to get a marriage license, please."

"Name."

"Johnson, Akisha."

"Age?"

"Eighteen."

"Groom's name?"

"Jones, Yusef."

"Yusef? You with *him*? Honey, you kids are in the wrong line."

"We are?"

"Try that line over there, on the other side of the Pepsi machine. And good luck. You're gonna need it, child. Next!"

"Next!"

"We want to apply for a marriage license."

"For who, might I ask?"

"For us. For me and him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She told us to get in this line. I guess because . . ."

"I can't give you a marriage license. He's black."

"I know, but I heard that if we get a special permit or something . . ."

"What you're talking about is a same-race certificate. But I can't give you one, and I wouldn't if I could. The very idea of blacks marrying *each other*, when . . ."

"So why'd she tell us to get in this line?"

"This line is for same-race certificate *applications*."

"So what do we have to do to get one of those?"

"Under the law, just ask for it. Even though there's something disgusting about . . ."

"So look, lady, I'm asking."

"Here. Fill this out and return it to window A21."

"Does that mean we have to start in line all over again?"

"What do you think? Next!"

"Next!"

"Hello, I'm not even sure we're in the right line. We want to get one of those special certificates. To get married."

"A same-race certificate. You're in the right line. But under Equal Access Provisions of the Melanin Conservation Act, we can't just hand those out. You have to have an Ozone Waiver to even apply for one."

"I already have the application filled out. See? That white girl over there told me about it."

"She told you wrong. What you filled out is the application for the *waiver*. But you can't get the waiver without 12.5 minutes of counseling."

"Can't you just stamp it or whatever? We've already been standing in three lines for hours, and my feet are . . ."

"Excuse me? Maybe you know more about my job than I do?"

"No."

"Good. Then listen up. I'm trying to be helpful. What I'm going to give you is an appointment slip to see the marriage counselor. Take it to Building B and give it to the clerk at the first desk."

"We have to go outside?"

"There's a covered walkway. But stay to the left, several panels are missing. Next!"

* * *

"Next!"

"We have an appointment slip."

"For what?"

"Counseling. To get a waiver, so we can apply for a certificate, or something. So we can get married."

"Sit down over there. The Sergeant Major will call you when he's ready."

"The Sergeant Major? We were supposed to see a marriage counselor."

"The Sergeant Major is the Marriage Counselor. Has been ever since the Declaration of Marital Law, under the Ozone Emergency Act. Where have you been?"

"We don't get married every day."

"Are you getting smart with me?"

"I guess not."

"I hope not. Take a seat, in those hard chairs, until I call you. Next!"

NEXT! AT ease. State your business."

"We need to get the counseling for . . ."

"I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to him."

"Me?"

"You're the man aren't you?"

"Uh, yes, sir! We, uh, want to get married, sir!"

"Speak up. And don't call me sir. I'm not an officer. Call me Sergeant Major."

"Yes, sir, I mean, Sergeant."

"Sergeant Major."

"Sergeant Major!"

"Now tell me again what it is you want."

"This is ridiculous. Yusef already told you . . ."

"Did I ask you to speak, young lady? Maybe you think because I'm black I'll tolerate your insolence?"

"No. Sergeant. Major."

"Then shut up. Carry on, young man."

"We want to get married. Sergeant Major!"

"That's what I thought I heard you say. And I guess you want my approval as your marriage counselor? My blessing, so to speak?"

"Well, yes."

"Well, you can forget it! For Christ's sake, boy, show a little backbone. A little social responsibility. You kids are the kind who are giving our kind a bad name. You don't see white folks lining up trying to evade the law, do you?"

"They don't need to line up."

"Watch your mouth, young lady. And nobody told you to sit down. This is a military office."

"She's been standing for hours, Sarge. Major. My fiance is, uh . . ."

"I'm pregnant."

"Will you quit butting in, young lady! Now, let me get this straight. Is she pregnant?"

"She is."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"That's why we want to get married. Sergeant Major."

"You're in the wrong office. I'll need to see a Melanin Heritage Impact Statement and a release from the Tactical Maternity Officer before I can even begin to counsel you. Take this slip to Office 23 in Building C."

"Outside again?"

"Only for a few yards."

"But the sunscorch factor is 104."

"Quit whining. Show a little pride. Imagine what it's like for white people. Next!"

"Next!"

"We were told to come here and see you because I'm . . ."

"I'm a woman too, I can tell. At ease. Sit down, you both look tired. Want a cigarette?"

"Isn't smoking bad for the baby?"

"Suit yourself. Now, how can I help you? Captain Kinder, here; Tactical Maternity."

"All we want is a certificate so we can get married."

"Negative, honey. No way. If you were both sterile, or over-age, *maybe*. But nobody's going to give you kids a same-race if you are already PG. Not with active replicator AAs in such short supply. Who are all us white folks going to marry?"

"Each other?"

"Very funny. And watch our kids fry. But seriously, you don't have to get married to have a child. You can have all the AAs you want OW. What's the problem?"

"We want to keep it."

"Keep it? Negative. You know that under the Melanin Heritage Conservation Act, Out-of-Wedlock African American children must be raised in Protective Custody."

"You mean prison."

"Haven't you heard that old saying, 'stone walls do not a prison make'? And this is not like the bad old days; since the Ozone Emergency, AA children are a precious resource. You should be glad to see them in such good homes."

"But they *are* prisons. I've seen them."

"So what? Does an NB, that's new-born, know the diff? And it's for the child's own good as well as the good of the society. Do you realize the culture shock for African American youth when they find themselves in prison at age sixteen or so? If they are raised in prison from infancy, the TA or Transitional Adaptation goes much more smoothly. Besides, they get out as soon as they marry, anyway."

"What if we don't want our kid to go to prison at all?"

"Whoa, Akisha! Do you mind if I call you Akisha? Are we back in the Dark Ages here, where the parents decide the child's future even before it is born? This is a free country and kids as well as parents have rights. Sure you don't want a cigarette?"

"I'm sure."

"Suit yourself. Let's cut the BS. You're nice kids, but under the Melanin Distribution Provisions of the Ozone Emergency Act, the law is clear. If you want to raise your own children, you'll have to marry legally."

"Which means marry a white person."

"As a white person myself, I'll overlook your racist tone of voice, which I'm sure you didn't mean. Is there something so terrible about marrying a white person?"

"No. I don't guess so."

"Okay. Now why don't you get with the program. Don't you know some nice white boy to marry?"

"Then I can keep my baby?"

"Not this one, but the next one. This one's double M and belongs to

Uncle Sam, or at least to the Natural Resources Administration of HEW&M."

"But what if I don't want to marry some damn white boy!"

"Jones, I was hoping we could handle this without emotional outbursts of naked bigotry. I see I was wrong. You are in danger of making me feel like an inadequate counselor with this racist attack on my professional self image. Is it because I'm white?"

"It's because I want to marry Yusef."

"Who just *happens* to be black? Let's get real, girl. There's nothing subtle about you same-race couples. The way you strut around, as if daring the world to rain on your disgusting little intraracial parade."

"But —"

"Whoa! Before you go blaming all white people because of your personal problems, let me warn you that you are already in violation of several applicable federal Civil Rights statutes. I'm afraid you've taken this matter out of my hands. I have no choice but to send you up to see the Colonel."

"The Colonel?"

"The Civil Rights Prosecutor. In the big office on the top floor of the main building."

"What about me?"

"You can go with her if you want, Yusef. But if I were you —"

"You're not."

"— I'd find a nice white girl and get married. Fast. Before you both get in more trouble than you can handle. Dismissed. Next!"

"Next!"

"We're here to see the Colonel."

"I am the Colonel. I'm here to help you if I can. And let me begin by warning you that anything you say will be used against you."

"Will be?"

"Can be, will be, whatever. Young lady, are you splitting hairs with me?"

"No."

"Good. Now, I see you are under indictment for Discrimination and Conspiracy."

"Conspiracy? All we wanted to do was get married."

"Which is against the law. Surely you knew that or you wouldn't have gone to the Marital Law Administration in the first place."

"We were trying to get a special license."

"Precisely. And what is that if not trying to evade the Melanin Redistribution Act which prohibits black intramarriage? The mere presence of you two in line A21 is in itself evidence of a conspiracy to circumvent the provisions of the Melanin Hoarding Ban."

"But we were trying to obey the law!"

"That makes it even worse. The law is a just master, but it can be harsh with those who try to sabotage its spirit by hypocritically observing its letter. However, I'm going to delay sentencing on Conspiracy and Hoarding because we have an even more serious charge to deal with here."

"Sentencing? We haven't been convicted yet."

"Young lady are you splitting hairs with me?"

"No."

"Good. Now let's move on to the Discrimination charge. Deep issues are involved here. You two aren't old enough to remember the Jim Crow Days in the South, when blacks weren't permitted to swim in the public pools. But I remember. Do you know what Discrimination is?"

"I read about it in school."

"Well, then you know that it is wrong. And blacks who don't marry whites are denying them the right to swim in their gene pool. Discriminating against them."

"Nobody's denying anybody the right to do anything! I just want to marry Yusef."

"That's a conveniently simplistic way of looking at things, isn't it? But it won't wash in a court of law. You can't marry Yusef without refusing to marry Tom, Dick or Harry. It's the same difference. If you marry a Black person, you are denying a White person the *right* to marry you; and that's a violation of his rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. Do you recognize those two pictures on the wall?"

"Sure. Martin Luther King and John Kennedy."

"John F. Kennedy. Somehow your generation has lost sight of the ideals they died for. Let me pose a purely hypothetical question — would it be fair to have a society in which one racial grouping, such as yours, had special rights and privileges denied to the rest of us?"

"It never bothered anybody before."

"Are you getting smart?"

"No. But what about the Fourteenth Amendment. Doesn't it apply to me?"

"Certainly it does. To you as an individual, and to your young man as well. But as African-Americans you are more than just individuals; you are also a precious natural treasure."

"Huh?"

Under the Melanin Heritage Act, your genetic material is a national resource, which America is now claiming for all its people, not just for a privileged few. It is the same genetic material that was brought across the ocean (bought and paid for, I might add) in the 18th and 19th centuries."

"But the slaves were freed."

"And their descendants as well. But genetic material, being immortal, can be neither slave nor free. It is an irreplaceable natural resource, like the forests or the air we breathe. And whether you kids like it or not, the old days when our resources were squandered and hoarded by special interests are over. Your genetic heritage is a part of the priceless national endowment of every man, woman and child in America, not just your private property to dispose of as you please. Am I making myself clear?"

"I guess."

"You guess! Would it be fair to have an African American child born double M; while a white child, denied his or her Melanin Birthright, was doomed to twice the chance of skin cancer and god-knows-what-else?"

"Nobody ever worried about white kids being born with twice everything before."

"Enough, young lady. I am sentencing you to nine months at Catskill Tolerance Development Camp, or until our baby is born, followed by nine years at Point Pleasant Repeat Pregnancy Farm. I sincerely hope you will use your time at Point Pleasant to think about how racist attitudes such as yours threaten the rainbow fabric of our multi-ethnic democracy."

"What about me?"

"I'm putting you on probation, Yusef, and taking you home for dinner as soon as court is over. I want you to meet my daughter. Marshall, put the cuffs on this one and take her away. Pay no heed to her crocodile tears: they are masters of deceit."

"Next!"



FILMS

K A T H I M A I O

LAUGHING IN THE DARK

ARE YOU afraid of the dark? Of course you are. We all are. Not necessarily of the night, but what it represents: the threatening unknown. And that cauldron of countless terrors always boils down to the two basic and universal fears: pain and death.

We share the anxiety — and we shall all know the experience. It's our coping mechanisms that vary widely. Religion is only one. Popular culture is another. A horror novel or murder mystery provides us with a safe means of facing down our demons. Movies can do the same. Even some tchotchkes can do the trick.

A few years ago I started collecting, in a casual way, the little figurines, called "calacas," associated with the Mexican holiday, Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). We norteamericanos have an annual candy-grubbing festival we call Halloween. It's a close (albeit

completely commercial and secular) cousin. Dias de Muertos retain the spiritual elements one would expect from observance of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. Villagers commune with their dead throughout the long night. Prayers are offered. But they pass the tequila, too.

Dia de los Muertos is, in fact, a party with death. Mask-wearing mummers do satiric theatricals. Treats like candy skulls are consumed. And calacas, hilarious bits of folk art, are created to represent the dead. The little figures, all with skull heads, are presented doing what they did in life. My collection includes a bride and groom, a writer at his typewriter, a woman guerilla (complete with crossbelt of ammo) toting her rifle, two guys (incongruously retaining beer-bellies in their skeletal state) playing a game of pool, and a couple of boney couch potatoes (labelled, in Spanish, "Our Northamerican Friends") staring at a TV. My current

favorite is an absurdly busty female skeleton primping in front of a mirror. (Let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come!)

Occasionally, friends do a double-take when they see these spooky little knick-knacks for the first time, but those that do are usually too discomfited to ask for an explanation. What would I say if they asked? That these are the most appropriate gee-gaws to grace the shelves of my mystery collection. That's true, but I delight in these gruesome little treasures for reasons that have nothing to do with decor. They laugh at the grimmest reality of all. They embrace death in a symbolic danse macabre — but the dance is a jitterbug.

One can also cozy up to the grinning reaper in the art of Charles Addams. A *New Yorker* cartoonist for over half a century, the dear departed Mr. Addams gave each of his masterful drawings the kiss of death. And each cartoon gave us the chance to chuckle at things most of us can't even speak about. There's an absurd justice in much of his work. For example, there was the moose who drove along in his roadster with a man strapped to the car's front fender. Then there was the secretary who refused to enter the glass-doored office where her boss hung from a light fixture because, as she tells a shocked

friend, she's not permitted to enter unless he buzzes her.

Some of Addams's characters are people we probably wouldn't want to know; like the boy who gleefully builds a coffin in his shop class, or the man who laughs his head off in a theater while everyone around him weeps. Yet, there's a touch of that boy and that man in all of us. And much, much more in a ghoulish clan of Addams creations who live in a decaying gothic mansion Wolcott Gibbs referred to as the Old Charles Addams Place. That clan is, of course, the Addams Family. And although they appeared in many *New Yorker* cartoons over the years, they got names and a much higher profile from a television sitcom that ran from September 1964 to September 1966.

Two seasons was a relatively short run. Yet there was something about Morticia (Carolyn Jones), Gomez (John Astin), and their extended family of freaks and misfits that stayed in the imagination of a generation. Children of the '60s knew that American family life didn't consist of the kinds of adventures Ozzie and Harriet had. And domestic vicissitudes didn't always play themselves out in so cheerful and loving a manner. Traditional sitcoms gave us comfort and joy, when fear and loathing was far too often our experience. *The Addams*

Family (and to a lesser extent, *The Munsters* of Mockingbird Lane) represented the kind of subversive culture we longed for.

Here, at last, was a flamboyantly twisted home life to which we could relate. Here was a show that provided a safe, even jovial fantasy about the dangers of domesticity. For the Addamses, violence and sexuality were a part of every familial tableau. Siblings wanted to kill one another, and mom and dad actually had libidinous urges. What a concept! It couldn't last on prime time in the mid-'60s, but baby boomers enjoyed many a lunchroom discussion of the latest episode for as long as they were able.

The most refreshing thing about *The Addams Family* wasn't, however, the family itself. The Addams were, in their own "altogether ooky" way, every bit as wholesome and loving as Ozzie and Harriet and their boys. The alluring Tish was matriarch to a healthy, happy family. It was the rest of society, represented by extremely normal-looking character actors in conservative suits and flowered frocks, that were the real sickos. (This was a message tailor-made for a generation of lunchroom adolescents who would, in a few short years, be taking over the administration buildings of their universities in defiance

of adult authority and polite society.)

Now, in the '90s, you don't have to be twelve to realize how "dys-functional" the All-American family is. And most of us have a pretty jaundiced view of society at large. How appropriate, therefore, that those paragons of good times through bad behavior, the Addams, should reappear — this time on the bigger screen.

Cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld mounts a very handsome debut as a feature film director. The look and feel of his movie are marvelous. Various hues of black and gray look as colorful as all get-out in the production design of Richard MacDonald and the costumes of his wife, Ruth Myers. Special effects — notably in the way Thing (the hand of Christopher Hart) has been freed from his black box to gambol through every scene like a devoted family pet — are all one could hope for. They add much to the movie without ever overpowering it. Nothing detracts from the performances of the film's perfectly-cast ensemble. I was especially taken by Christina Ricci, who was so adorable in *Mermaids*. She is adorably malevolent as Wednesday, a homicidal wunderkind worthy of her two noble parents.

Angelica Huston has said that

she's wanted to play Morticia ever since she was a child. (In Huston's childhood home in Ireland, Charles Addams's cartoons were apparently considered perfect bathroom reading.) Decades of preparation have served this lady well. She doesn't have the saucy quality of Carolyn Jones, but her elegance and intelligence make her Morticia just as enchanting. She may have ice-cold hands, but her heart is warm. And she possesses so much pale allure that she can set her husband's blood to boil.

As Gomez, Raul Julia is equal parts latin lover, devoted paterfamilias, and mischievous child. I've always longed to see Julia in romantic leads. (I thought Susan Sarandon was nuts when she didn't drop her hubby, Ed Hermann, for Julia in *Compromising Positions*.) Gomez is further proof that Mr. Julia should always get the girl. His heavy-lidded smoldering look is better than Valentino's, and he wrecks a toy train with so much impish pleasure that you forget all about the innocent fellow you get a glimpse of on board.

The Addams Family has so much going for it that the film's great success during the autumn box-office doldrums makes perfect sense. What's harder to fathom is why, with so much money and talent on the line, more effort wasn't

put into the writing of the film. Although, come to think of it, "effort" probably isn't the best choice of words. Two talented folks with proven track records in creating film fantasy got first crack at it.

Caroline Thompson, who wrote *Edward Scissorhands*, and Larry Wilson, one of the folks behind the *Beetlejuice* story, wrote the original screenplay. And re-wrote it. And worked on it some more. Then, producer Scott Rudin handed off to novelist/playwright Paul Rudnick. Director Sonnenfeld, who added a few script flourishes himself, told the *L.A. Times* that the film went through so many changes that they ran out of paper colors for the various drafts. They ran out of creative steam somewhere along the way, as well. The rule about too many cooks certainly applies, yet things could have been much worse. What's missing is a storyline with some level of complexity and an adequate sense of contrast.

Now that Phil and Oprah have shown us the underside of normalcy, you'd expect even more to be made of the satiric possibilities of this material. More than ever, the twisted Addams tribe looks mighty good in comparison with the straight world. Regrettably, even less is made of the contrasts in Paramount's (formerly Orion's) 30 million dollar production of *The*

Addams Family than in the old sitcom.

That's the biggest shortcoming of this particular adaptation. Our extremely odd heroes aren't shown to be at odds with the happy-face world around them often enough. Those few instances when sober society plays the foil are the funniest in the movie. As when the proud elders of the clan attend parents' night at the neighborhood school.

Little Wednesday has eschewed the expected choices of personal heroes (Mr. Bush, Mrs. Bush, Jane Pauley) in honor of a female ancestor burned at the stake as a witch. This alarms her poor teacher, but makes her mama kvell. (As well she should!) And at the night's talent show, Wednesday and her brother Pugsley (Jimmy Workman) perform a dramatic and exceedingly bloody interpretation of a Shakespearean duel that blows the buttoned-down types away.

That sense of daring to be very different, of freely expressing a morbid curiosity about blood and death in the face of god-fearing conformity, is badly needed throughout the movie. But in all but one or two scenes, it's sadly lacking. What remains is a flimsy plot about a prodigal Uncle Fester (Christopher Lloyd) told in a style of writing not unlike that of Mr. Addams himself.

Picture yourself sitting on the throne at Angelica's old sod rest facility. Flip through that book of Addams cartoons. There you have the movie: A sight gag here, a double-take there, a pun, a flash of the bizarre, a gruesome joke, a (gently) shocking bit of business.

I must admit that I found the overall effect rather pleasing. *The Addams Family* truly is a homage to the genius behind the cartoons. Those familiar with the original art will recognize the lines and shtick — starting with the title sequence gag where the family prepares to dump a vat of unspeakable ick on a band of cheery carollers — taken directly from the imagination of Charles Addams. What if the film is more like a comedy routine than a screen play? I found *The Addams Family* to be a congenial and entertaining comedy routine — and that's what matters most.

As this happy family of ghouls leaves us, they are playing a rousing game of "Wake the Dead" at the family cemetery. It's a cheerful Halloween ritual that reminded me of Dia de los Muertos. To say that *The Addams Family* is the Hollywood equivalent of the Mexican "calacas" might be assigning this movie a social significance it in no way deserves. But the success of this film with no mega-stars, despite almost universal critical contempt,

is more than just a tribute to the folks who made the movie and the man who sketched his way into the nightmares of America.

The Addams Family will probably come back to haunt us, again and again, because they are such great role models. We wish we could be like them. And not just because of their mutual support and devotion, although their fully "functional" family unit is worthy

of envy. The Addams Family are heroes because they are the only people we know who are no longer afraid of the dark. To say they embrace it is an understatement. They have learned to party with death.

It has been said that it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. As a moviegoer, I'd say that *laughing* in the dark, at the dark, can bring even more comfort.

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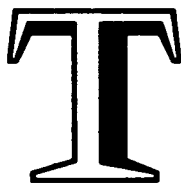
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Paul Di Filippo's strange sense of humor has won him numerous admirers over the years, and has become a bit of a trademark. His short fiction has appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing Stories, and Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine. His last appearance in F&SF was "The Grange" (October/November 1991). "Fractal Paisleys" is slightly different. It takes Paul's sense of strange to new and dizzying heights.

FRACTAL PAISLEYS

By Paul Di Filippo



HAT NIGHT THE LI'L BEAR Inn was as crowded as the last copter out of Saigon.

But the atmosphere was a little more frenzied.

All three pool tables were hidden by tight packs of players and spectators, protruding cues making the whole mass resemble a patchwork porcupine. The dart boards looked like Custer's troops. Harley Fitts was rocking the pinball machine toward a high score: a sizable task, given that two sisters who called themselves Frick and Frack were perched on it. Rollo Dexadreen was monopolizing the single video game, as usual. Archie Opterix, on kazoo, was accompanying Gig von Beaver — who was making farting noises with a hand under his armpit — in a rendition of "Born to Run." Kitty Koerner was dancing atop the jukebox, which was

playing Hank Williams, Jr., though Kitty was doing something that looked like the Watusi.

Above the sounds of clicking pool balls, thwocking darts, ringing bells, exploding aliens, kazoo, farts, Hank, Jr., and the bug zapper hung outside the screen door that gave onto the gravel parking lot, the calls for drinks were continuous.

"Tracey, two shots!"

"Tracey, another pitcher!"

"Tracey, six rum 'n' cokes!"

The woman behind the bar — Tracey Thorne-Smith — was on the tall side, and skinny as a book of poems by a sixteen-year-old virgin. She had long, straight brown hair and a sociable smile, though her features were overlaid with the signs of worry. She wore a white shirt knotted above her navel, and a pair of cheap jeans. Moving like an assembly-line worker with the belt cranked up, the piecework rate cut in half, and the next mortgage payment due, she paused only long enough to wipe the sweat from her forehead now and then.

A weary waitress appeared at one end of the crowded bar, where she set down her tray. She was short and round-faced, and her wavy hair — dyed a color not found in nature — was pinched in a banana clip, one tendril escaping to hang damply against her cheek.

The bartender moved down to take her order.

"What'll it be, Catalin?"

"It's 'lick it, slam it, 'n' suck it' time again, Trace. Larry and his city friends, in the corner there."

"Four margaritas coming up."

Catalina leaned gratefully on the bar. "Lord, it's hot! You'd think that cheap bastard would get some air-con in here."

Her back to Catalina, Tracey said, "You best not hold your breath waiting for the Westinghouse van to arrive, Cat. You know well as I do that Larry's been pinching every penny, so's he can buy into the syndicate those boys he's with represent. And something tells me he's pinched himself a considerable sum, what with the way those lizards are crawling all over him. No, I wouldn't count on no air-conditioning anytime soon." Tracey set the salt-rimmed glasses two at a time on Catalina's tray. "How they tipping tonight?"

The waitress tucked the loose hair behind her ear. "Not bad. But I aim

to get a little more out of Larry later, after closing."

Tracey made a sour face. "I don't see how you can bring yourself to be nice to him like that."

"Oh, he's not that bad. He's been real lonely since Janice died. It's downright pathetic sometimes. He keeps telling me, 'She was my honey-pot, and I was her Li'l Bear.'"

"Eee-yew!"

Primping her hair, Catalina said, "That remark don't show much sympathy, Tracey, nor much common sense. You should try being nice to Larry, like I do. Might get yourself a little bonus. You sure could use it, I bet, what with Jay Dee being outa work."

"Forget it! Not only would I never let that man touch me in a million years, but if I did and Jay Dee found out, he'd kill him. Why, he can just about stand me working here as it is."

Catalina shrugged. "Your call. It's not like you're married or nothing."

After Catalina had sashayed away, Tracey went back to filling the nonstop orders.

She was bending over for a fresh bottle of scotch, when she felt a hand on her rear end.

"You shore got a nice ass for such a skinny — gack!"

Tracey straightened up and turned around. "Jay Dee," she said, "turn that poor sucker loose."

Jay Dee McGhee removed his choke hold from beneath the impulsive patron's jaw and released the burly man's wrist, which he had been holding at about jaw level, only behind the man's back. Shoving the gagging man away from the bar, he dropped down onto the vacant stool.

"Draw me a Bud, Trace. I had a long, hot walk."

Jay Dee was shaggy and unshaven, with the looks of a mischievous five-year-old, perhaps one just caught affixing a string of firecrackers to a cat's tail. He wore a green work shirt with the sleeves ripped off and the same K mart brand jeans as his girlfriend. In fact, they were a pair of hers, since the two were much of a size. He had a tattoo on each wiry bicep: on the left was a dagger-pierced, blood-dripping heart with the admonition TAKE IT EASY; on the right was a grinning, horned and tailed, pitchfork-bearing devil above the legend CLEAN AND SERENE.

Tracey pulled the tap. "You walked all the way from the trailer park?"

After a deep sip, Jay Dee answered, "How else was I supposed to get here?"

You got the car — not that it'd do me much good anyway — and ain't nobody we know gonna give me a ride."

Slipping a dirty rag onto the bar in front of her lover of six months, and scrubbing violently, Tracey said, "Only thing is, you weren't supposed to come here at all."

"Jesus, Trace, gimme a break! How long can a man sit and watch television? Day and night, night and day! Zap, zap, zap with the damned remote! I'm going outa my head! I hadda get out."

"Buy why here? I told you: I get nervous with you around when I'm trying to wait on people. I can't do my job."

"It's a damn good thing I did come, or the next thing you know, that asshole would've had your pants off."

"Don't make me laugh. I can take care of jerks like that without your help. I got along just fine all those years before I met you."

"Well, maybe. Though the two black eyes and the busted ribs I seen them tape up at the clinic don't sound to me like you could take care of anything except getting knocked around."

Tracey glared. "I told you: Gene was a little too much for me. But you don't run into someone like him twice in your life. And what do you mean, you watched the doctor fix me up?"

"Well, it's true."

"The janitor at the Lakewood Walk-in Emergency Clinic was allowed to spy on patients?"

"It wasn't a case of being allowed."

"Oh, I get it. How many women did you size up, before you settled on me?"

"Well, lessee — Christ, Trace, we're getting off the track! The plain fact is, I missed you tonight! This routine sucks. With you working till two and sleeping till noon. I hardly get to see you no more. And then I got to rattle around in that tin can like a lone pea. . . I'm sick of it!"

Tracey stopped polishing the counter. "I know, I know, Jay Dee. We're going through a rough time now. But it won't last forever. I don't like it any more than you, but right now we need this job. And if Larry sees you here, after what happened the last time —"

"That fight wasn't my fault."

"It don't matter. He's still pissed at you. If I didn't work so good and so cheap, I woulda been fired right then."

"Well, there's no law says a man can't visit his girlfriend at work. Long as I don't cause no trouble, there's nothing he can do."

"This is his joint, Jay Dee; he can do whatever he — look out!"

Holding on to the bar, Jay Dee shoved his stool backward into the crotch of the man he had choked, who grunted and dropped the beer bottle he had been aiming at Jay Dee's head. While the man was still recovering, Jay Dee laid him low with two succinct punches.

"It's plumb foolish to hold a grudge —" Jay Dee began.

"What in hell is going on here?"

Larry Livermore was shaped roughly like a traffic cone, and only marginally taller. Balding, he wore enough cheap gold around his neck to outfit a pawnshop window. He was accoutred in a checked shirt and lime-green trousers. Spotting Jay Dee, he turned to Tracey.

"I warned you about letting this troublemaker in here again, Thorne-Smith. And now he's made me look bad in front of some important friends, like I can't even manage my own joint. I don't need headaches like this."

Tracey had stepped out from behind the bar. "It won't happen again, Larry — I promise."

"I'm sure of it, 'cause I'm canning you now." Larry reached into his pocket, took out a roll of cash secured with a rubber band, and peeled off a hundred. "Here's half a week's pay. Take off."

Jay Dee moved menacingly toward the squat man. Larry's mouth opened in shock. "Hey, wait a minute —"

Tracey laid a hand on his shoulder. "No, Jay Dee, it's not worth it. Let's go."

Out in the parking lot, gravel crunched beneath their shoes. They walked silently to their car, a 1972 Plymouth Valiant, more rust than steel, its flaking chrome bumper bearing a sticker that advised ONE DAY AT A TIME. Tracey opened the passenger-side door and slid across the seat to take the wheel. Jay Dee got in after her. When the engine finally caught, they drove off.

Halfway back to the trailer camp, one of them finally spoke.

"You shoulda let me hit him, Trace."

Tracey swiveled her head angrily, taking her eyes off the dark road. "Hit him! Is that all you know how —"

There was a noise like a hundred-pound sack of flour being dropped on the hood of their car, and the sensation of an impact. Tracey slammed on the brakes.

"Could be a deer," said Jay Dee without much hope or conviction. "Though life has shown me that bad luck usually comes like an elephant. Namely, in buckets."

"I — I'll turn the car around so we can see what we hit"

Moving forward slowly, cutting the wheel, Tracey made a three-point turn.

There was a man lying in the middle of the road.

"Oh my God —"

Jay Dee got out.

The victim was a white guy in a business suit that appeared to be made out of rubber, with all the tailoring, including the shirtfront, stamped on. The suit continued on to his feet, forming shoes. He did, however, wear a separate tie patterned with paisleys. Something about the tie drew Jay Dee's fascinated gaze. Why, the borders of each paisley were formed of little paisleys. And the little paisleys were made of littler paisleys. And those were made up of even littler paisleys! And on, and on, and —

"What's the matter, Jay Dee?"

Jay Dee shook his head. "Nothing, I guess. . . . I just felt dizzy, like I was hanging over the edge of a skyscraper. . . . Hey, look — He's holding something —"

Prying open the dead man's hand, Jay Dee removed the object.

The thing squirmed for a moment in Jay Dee's grip, then settle down to solidity.

At that moment a wave of shimmering disintegration passed down the man from head to toe. Then the corpse was gone.

"Mo-ther-fuck. . . ."

Tracey was squeezing his devil with both hands. "This is too spooky for me, Jay Dee. Let's split."

A minute later and a mile onward, Tracey asked, "What was in his hand, Jay Dee?"

"Pears to be nothing but a goddamn television remote." Jay Dee made to throw out the window, then stopped. "It's awfully big, though. . . ."

Tracey made it back to the trailer camp in record time, without encountering any further obstacles. She pulled up alongside their home, an aqua-trimmed, sag-roofed aluminum box with the former tenant's flower garden run to weeds that half-hid the two creaky wooden steps braced against the side of the structure.

From the weeds emerged Mr. Boots, a large tomcat the color of whole-wheat bread, and with white stockings. He carried a dead mouse proudly in his mouth. Spotting the car, he leaped inside through the open window to devour his feast in the privacy he required.

"Got to learn that cat some manners one of these days. . . ."

Inside, Tracey went straight for the bottle of vodka above the tiny sink full of dirty dishes. "Lord, I need a drink! I never knew that killing someone would feel like this — even if it was an accident."

Jay Dee flopped down into a beat-up chair. "Least when you kill someone, you do a thorough job of it, Trace. No stiff left behind to clutter up things. Now look, calm down! Who knows what that was we hit? Chances are it wasn't even human, the way it vanished."

"I know, I know; that's what I've been telling myself since it happened. But it still leaves a person kinda shaky, you know?"

"Just take a pull and sit down. You'll feel better in a minute."

Jay Dee fell to examining the remote control he had taken from the corpse.

The black plastic device was about twice as big as a standard control, with more than the usual number of buttons. It had the usual smoky, translucent cap on one end, where the signal would emerge. It bore no brand name, nor were the buttons labeled.

But as Jay Dee studied it, this changed.

Gold letters appeared on the face of the device, seeming to float up from deep inside the case.

MASTER DIGITAL REMOTE ran the wording across the top of the case. Beneath each button, smaller letters spelled out various odd functions.

One button was designated DEMO.

Jay Dee pressed it.

The control spoke.

"Please set me down on a convenient flat surface, pointed away from any objects of value, sentient or otherwise."

Tracey had her head in the fridge. "You say something, Jay Dee?"

Jay Dee leaned forward and calmly set the unit down on a table, making sure it was pointed at an exterior wall. "No, no, it's just this here box talking."

"Ha, ha, that's funny. Want a baloney sandwich?"

The control continued its speech. "I am a quasi-organic, eleven-dimen-

sional valve of Turing degree three. I am capable of modulating the Fredkinian digital substrate of the plenum."

"Say what?"

The control paused. "Call me a magic lamp."

Jay Dee got angry. "Hey, I'm not stupid. . . ."

Tracey approached with a plate of sandwiches. "I never said you were, hon."

"No, it's this smart-mouth box. Just 'cause I didn't understand all the ten-dollar words it threw at me, it started treating me like a kid."

"I am merely attempting to phrase my function in a manner most intelligible to the listener. There was no slur intended."

Tracey slowly set the plate down on the corner of Jay Dee's chair; it tipped, and the sandwiches slid into his lap. He jumped up, and they fell to the floor, baloney draping his shoes.

"Perhaps an exhibition of my functions would clarify my nature. . . ."

"Sh-sure," said Tracey.

"First, we have 'smudge,'" A square foot of the wall in front of the talking remote lost all color, all features. It hurt to look at it. "'Smudge' simply strips all macroscopic features and quantum properties from an object, reducing it to bare digital substrate, the underlying basis of all creation."

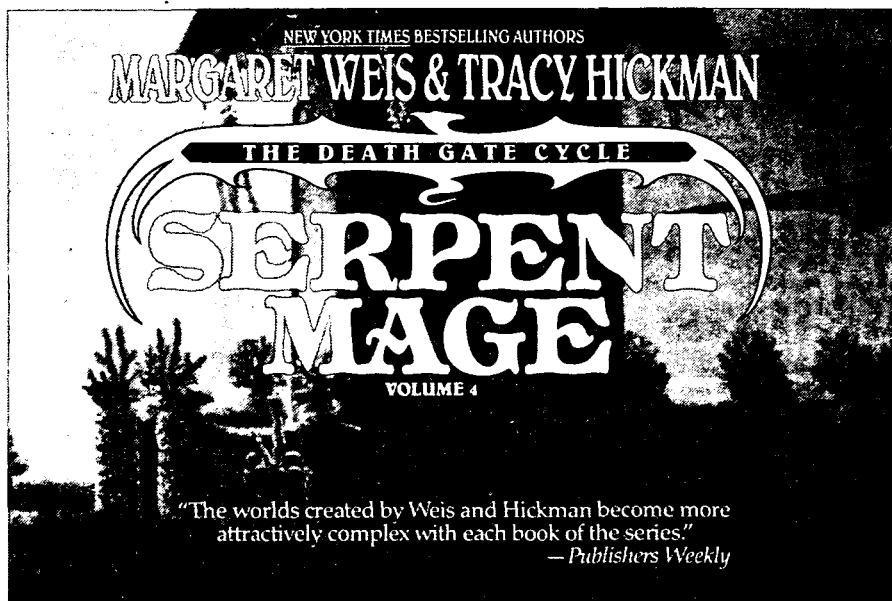
"Not much use to that," said Jay Dee.

"You would be surprised. Once an object is smudged, we can use 'peel' to lift and superimpose a new set of space-time characteristics on it. For example."

Mr. Boots, as usual, had gotten in through a broken screen, and was now atop the table with the control. The box suddenly swiveled autonomously and aimed itself at the cat. A small square of fur was somehow peeled off Mr. Boots — yet his hide was left intact. The square grew in size, then was lofted through the air like a two-dimensional piece of cloth to be superimposed over the smudge spot, becoming an integral fur patch on the trailer wall.

"Next, we should consider the 'checkerboard wipe.' This wipe dissolves any nonliving object." Next to the fur patch, a portion of the wall big as a door flickered in a mosaic of squares, then was gone. The trees behind the trailer could be plainly seen. A breeze blew in.

"'Motes' will cause the dissolution of any living substance."



A cloud of infinitesimal glowing objects suddenly girdled the trunk of one tree. The next second they were gone, as was a clean chunk out of the tree. The upper part of the tree hung for a fraction of a second, then began to tip toward the trailer.

Jay Dee and Tracey looked up from their prone position on the floor, Mr. Boots between them. The roof of their rented home was buckled in a vee.

"Such minor mishaps can be easily corrected," said the box. "First, we use checkerboard and motes to dissolve the damaged roof and tree." The stars looked down on a stunned Tracey and Jay Dee. Mr. Boots mewed plaintively. "Now a new function: 'window.'" A window opened up in the air before their eyes, six inches off the floor. In it was displayed the ornate roof of the First National Bank in town. "Do you like this roof?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess. . . ."

"Using 'splinter,' we reassign its spatial coordinates and reassemble it in the correct place."

The walls of the trailer began to creak under the new weight.

"Quick, Trace, outa here —!"

They were standing by the car. Mr. Boots was inside Jay Dee's shirt, his

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head emerging from one ripped armhole. The trailer and all their meager possessions were crushed beneath the bank's stone pediments.

"At least we're shut of that goddamn box —," began Jay Dee.

A hole opened in the debris by checkerboard wipe. The Master Remote levitated out and floated to land atop the hood of the Valiant.

"I am sorry about the destruction. I was not aware of the flimsy construction of your dwelling. If I were Turing degree four, perhaps I would have had the foresight to examine its parameters, instead of taking your word that the roof was suitable."

Jay Dee started to make a sharp reply, then stopped. A curious look combining joy, revenge, and a wet dream spread over his features.

Tracey grew alarmed. "Jay Dee, are you o.k.? You look like Saint Paul after the lightning hit him. . . ."

"I'm fine. In fact, I feel more full of piss than a Portajohn. C'mon, get in the car, Trace."

Jay Dee grabbed the Master Remote and hustled Tracey behind the wheel.

"Where are we going?" she asked when he was inside.

Mr. Boots squirmed out of Jay Dee's shirt and leaped into the backseat to finish his mouse. "Back to the Li'l Bear. And after that, I think we'll pay a visit to the First National."

"Oh. I see. You really think —"

"I sure do. And so do you."

ON THE way out of the trailer park, the box said, "I have several more functions. Shall I demonstrate them now?"

"Hold on till we got us a target that deserves it," said Jay Dee.

There were still three cars in the parking lot of the Li'l Bear Inn, though it was long past closing.

Tracey clicked her nails on the steering wheel. "The Caddy is Larry's, and the Dodge is Catalina's. I figure the other must belong to those syndicate guys. What now?"

"I hadn't counted on this. . . . But it's no reason to back down. Let's check what they're doing."

There was one small window into Larry's office: it was frosted, and six feet off the ground. Light illuminated it.

"I think I'll just make myself a little peephole," said Jay Dee.

"Why not? You're good at that."

Jay Dee started poking at the WIPE button. Nothing happened.

"Why are you doing that?" said the box. "It's unpleasant. You could simply ask for what you wanted."

"Why you got buttons, then?"

"To conform to your notion of what I am."

"Oh. Well, drill me a peephole here, then."

A patch of wall dissolved, revealing the back of a file cabinet. In the next second, a square tunnel opened up straight through the cabinet and its contents.

Jay Dee put his eye to the hole. He let out a low whistle.

"What's going on? Is Cat in there?"

"I expect she's somewhere in the pile. Unless those good old boys are getting off on each other."

"How disgusting! That poor thing!"

"I don't see her putting up much of a fight, nor complaining too loud."

"You wouldn't neither if your job depended on it, and you had two kids

and no man at home. Quit goggling, now, and do something."

Jay Dee addressed the remote. "Box, you got any way of immobilizing someone in a nonviolent fashion?"

"I believe 'ribbons' would serve such a purpose. Would you like a demonstration first?"

"Save it for the real thing. O.K., Box, make us a door."

Studs, wires, insulation, and plasterboard, all neatly truncated, formed the edges of the new door. Jay Dee stepped in, Tracey following.

The orgy dissolved in shock into its component naked people.

Larry's hairy, obese stomach was quivering in indignation. "What the fuck —! Thorne-Smith, I'll have your butt for this!"

"No you won't, shithead. No way, no how. Box — ribbons on the men!"

Golden ribbons wide as a man's palm materialized, wrapping themselves around four sets of wrists and ankles before fastening themselves in fancy bows.

"Good job, Box."

Catalina had gotten to her feet and was trying to assemble her clothing, flustered as a rabbit caught in the open. "Tracey, I don't understand what's going on, but you know I've always been a good friend of yours, haven't I? I even tried to talk Larry into giving you your job back. Didn't I, Larry? Tell her."

"Shut up, you dumb twat. I'll bet you were in on this."

Catalina had both legs through half her panties and, oblivious, was trying to pull them up. "Larry, no, I swear it!"

The syndicate men had been eyeing Jay Dee coldly throughout. Now one said, "Kid, you're hash after this."

Jay Dee assumed a contemplative stance, one hand squeezing his chin. "You know, I don't like the way you-all are talking to me. I think I'll just do something about it."

He pointed the remote at Larry's face and pressed SMUDGE.

Larry's face was replaced by a blank, eye-boggling surface. The results were so satisfactory to Jay Dee that he repeated the procedure on the other three men.

"Oh my God. . . ." Catalina dropped her panties and raised both hands in front of her face.

"Come off it, Cat. You know I don't hurt no women."

Catalina began to cry. Tracey moved to comfort her. Jay Dee turned to

the old-fashioned safe in the corner.

Once the top was gone, the piles of cash were easy to lift out.

"Those appear cumbersome," offered the remote. "If you wish, you could store them in a 'cube.'"

"Let's see."

A silver cube appeared in the air; its lid elevated to reveal its empty interior.

"Where's it go when it ain't here?"

"It rolls up along several Planck-level dimensions you can't sense."

"Oh. Is that safe?"

"As houses."

"Good enough." Jay Dee began tossing the money into the cube. When he had emptied the safe, the remote shut the cube's lid, and it collapsed on itself, dwindling along odd angles.

Tracey stood with her arm around Catalina, who was still sobbing, though less urgently. "Are you done now, Jay Dee?"

"Almost. I think I'd like to say good-bye to Larry. Box, give him back his face."

"Did you save it?"

"Shucks, I thought you were gonna handle everything. . . ."

"I cannot read minds."

"All right, this presents a problem. Lessee. . . ."

A stuffed moose head was mounted on the wall. It caught Jay Dee's eye. He smiled.

"No, Jay Dee, it ain't natural —"

It was the work of a few seconds to peel off the moose's features and slap them on Larry's head.

The beady black eyes of the animal with the fat human body filled with intelligence — of a limited sort. Larry's head dipped under the unaccustomed weight of his new antlers. His wide, wet nostrils flared. His snout opened to reveal a long, stropping tongue. A sound midway between a moo and a sob issued forth.

"Larry, I just want to say thanks for Tracey's back pay for all her hard work, and for the extra compensation for the way you constantly ran her down. It was mighty generous of you. Which is why I done you the return favor of giving you a handsomer face than what you started out with. I predict you are gonna be a big hit with the ladies with that new tongue. It's

been fun, but we gotta go now. C'mon, Trace. . . ."

Catalina cried out. "Jay Dee, wait! You can't just leave me here, now that Larry thinks I set him up!"

"That's true. O.K., you can come with us."

Tracey asked, "Are you gonna fix up those other guys with new faces?"

"No. It don't appeal to me."

On the way out, Jay Dee noticed a Rolex lying amid the discarded clothes of the syndicate men. He grabbed it and slipped it on.

Outside, Catalina, still naked, climbed into the back seat with Mr. Boots, who eagerly assumed his rightful place in her lap. With Tracey driving, they roared off.

Jay Dee summoned up his cube full of money and began to riffle through the bills. He broke open a stack and showered them down on his head. He let out a wild whoop.

"Girls, we got us the gold watch and everything! Let's see a smile."

Tracey let amusement break through the sober mien she had been maintaining, "I got to admit, Larry always did remind me more of a bull moose than a bear."

"You think you could afford to buy a girl a new dress with some of that?" asked Catalina.

"Buy? Why should we buy anything unless we absolutely hafta? Box, show the lady some clothes."

A window opened up onto the interior of a department store someplace where, judging by the light, it was early morning. The signs in the store were in French. The window onto a sunny world in the middle of the night-darkened car was like a dimensionless television. Catalina's eyes widened in amazement.

"See anything you like?"

"Um, that blue dress, and those shoes — size six — and that red teddy —"

The window splintered, re-forming into the articles of clothing Catalina had named. She managed — with much attractive wiggling of her compact, generously proportioned body — to get dressed.

"Well," said Tracey, "are we going to the First National now?"

"I don't see any reason to be greedy, considering that we can reach inside a bank vault anytime we want. No, they're gonna need all their capital for a new roof. I say we put a few miles between us and our friends

and then get us some rest. It's been a busy night." A thought occurred to Jay Dee. "Box, can those ribbons be cut?"

"Yes. I was not aware you needed them to be indestructible."

"No, no, that's good. I don't wanna be responsible for killing anyone, even slimeballs like Larry and his buddies. They'll get loose sooner or later."

Catalina interrupted. "Jay Dee — exactly what you got there that's talking to you like that?"

"I don't purely know, Cat. But it sure is handy."

An hour's silent drive onward, the neon of a motel sign caught their eyes.

SEVEN BIRCHES MOTOR COURT
COLOR TV — WEEKLY RATES
VACANCY

"Looks as good as anyplace else we're likely to find. Pull in, Trace."

"None too soon, neither. The road was starting to float up at me."

"Ain't it funny," chirped Catalina. "I'm not sleepy at all! I feel like the night's still young!"

Tracey grunted, but refrained from comment. Jay Dee assumed a nervous look.

Coasting across a cindered lot, past the sputtering sign, they pulled up next to six long-decaying stumps and under a lone birch tree, its foliage as draggled and dusty as that of a desert palm. Jay Dee and Tracey piled wearily out of the car, while Catalina bounced around, holding Mr. Boots, who had his forepaws on her shoulders and was butting his head under her chin.

"Cat, can't you quiet down?" said Trace. "I'm getting more and more tired just watching you."

"I can't help it; I feel wonderful! I'm shed of my horrible job, I got a new dress on, and I'm in the company of two rich friends. What more could I want?"

"Ain't you worried 'bout your kids?"

"Hell no! I left 'em with my sister when I went to work, and she knows what to do with 'em if I don't make it home. I could stash 'em there for months! Cindy's got six of her own, so two more don't hardly make a ripple."

"Well, that's fine for you. But tonight already I done got my ass grabbed by a drunk, was humiliated in front of a whole roomful of people by my boss, who immediately became my ex-boss, smashed my car into a thing from another world — which I apparently killed in some unnatural fashion — had my house come tumbling down around my ears, seen a man turned into a moose, and had to drive sixty miles just to find a place to lay my head down. So you'll excuse me if I'm not in a mood to party."

Catalina, crestfallen, stopped pirouetting; Mr. Boots turned his head and hissed at his mistress. "Gee, Trace, I was just trying to be cheerful and show I was grateful for the rescue and the clothes, like. . . ."

"Well, just stow it till morning, O.K.?"

Jay Dee stepped conciliatorily between the two women. "Listen, girls, we're all dead beat. If we gotta have a contest of feminine wills, can't we get ourselves some sleep first?"

Tracey and Catalina said nothing. Jay Dee took this as assent. "O.K., good. One thing first, though. I wanna do something about this heap of ours. It's too easy to spot if anyone comes looking for it. Not that I expect Harry to have much luck tracking us down, even if he decides to venture out, looking like he does."

Pointing the remote at the old Valiant, he smudged it out to a heap of quivering nothingness. Then he peeled off the image of a new Lincoln Continental parked next to the MANAGER'S OFFICE, and superimposed it atop what had been their car.

Two Lincolns, identical down to the license plates, now stood a few yards apart.

Jay Dee laughed. "This is a hundred times better than boosting a car! Ain't nothing for the owner to report stolen!"

"Don't you think somebody's gonna notice something, though?" asked Tracey.

"We'll be gone pretty early. And who compares plates, long as their own aren't missing?"

They headed to the lighted office.

The clerk was a guy in his early sixties, strands of white hair across a bald spot, crabby face like a clenched fist. He had a full ashtray in front of him, and a lit Camel in his hand. Something old, grainy, and black and white filled the small television screen before him: Leo G. Carroll with the sound turned down.

"Two rooms," said Jay Dee. "Cash up front."

"You can't take that mangy animal in, buddy. I ain't having fleas in my sheets."

This was the last straw for an exhausted Tracey; she began to weep. "Muh — Mr. Boots always sleeps with us. . . ."

"Hold on, Trace. I'll take care of this."

Jay Dee raised the remote to point at the clerk, who remained unflustered at the seemingly innocent, though odd, threat.

Tracey grabbed his arm. "No!"

"Oh, for Christ's sake. . . . All right, look — take this money, pay the man, and sign us in. I'll put Mr. Boots in the car for the night." His back to the clerk, Jay Dee winked broadly at Tracey, as if he knew what he was going to do.

Outside, Jay Dee, carrying the tom, stopped by a parked car. Visible in the backseat was a suitcase. Jay Dee paused, everything now clear.

"Box, save what this cat looks like, then smudge it."

The remote said, "Done." Then Jay Dee peeled off the image of the suitcase, which materialized like a wraith outside the car.

"Superimposition of a larger mass-pattern atop a smaller one causes an energy deficit that must be made up from some source," warned the remote. "I have been handling this automatically, but thought I should mention it."

"So you mentioned it. Now, just turn this cat into some baggage."

The lights in the parking lot seemed to dim momentarily. Without further delay, the spatio-temporal digital suchness of the suitcase was layered onto the featureless lump of cat.

Jay Dee carried the suitcase back in.

"All set?" he asked.

Tracey held one key, Catalina another.

"Great, let's go."

The clerk warned, "Now, don't try sneaking that cat in, 'cause I'll know it —"

At that moment the suitcase meowed.

"So you got it inside there. I thought so. Open it up."

Jay Dee set the suitcase down, flipped the latches, and sprang the lid.

The inside of the suitcase was lined deeply with fur, top and bottom, side to side; a clawed paw occupied each corner. Mr. Boots, apparently

none the worse for being turned into a living rug, looked up imploringly from his somewhat flattened skull.

"Meow?"

The clerk's eyes bulged out rather like Mr. Boot's. He held up his hands as if to ward off an apparition. "Shut it; shut it!"

Jay Dee complied. "Can we go now?"

The clerk nodded violently, reaching for a bottle in the desk drawer, then apparently reconsidering.

The cinder-block units were strung out in a line, each sharing two walls with its neighbors.

Tracey and Jay Dee accompanied Catalina inside her room. The ex-waitress seemed to have crashed from her high. "Ain't it funny — I feel kinda sad now. Scared a little, too. What if Larry and his buddies come after us? I don't think I could take looking at somebody without a face all by myself, never mind three somebodies. Couldn't I — couldn't I share your room?"

"No way, Catalina. Look, we'll leave the connecting door open. And you can keep Mr. Boots for company, since he seems to like you so much."

"I don't want no furry suitcase in here."

"No, we'll put him back together like his old self." Jay Dee quickly restored Mr. Boots to his saved appearance. The cat rubbed itself happily against their legs, until Catalina reached down to pick it up.

The remote spoke. "Although your strategy worked, it would have made more sense simply to store the animal in a cube, shrink the cube, then open it inside the room."

"You can put living things inside one of them packages and roll 'em up eleven ways from Sunday without hurting 'em?"

"Yes."

Jay Dee nodded sagely, as if storing the information away for future use. "Well, good night, Cat. See you in the morning."

In their own room, Jay Dee and Tracey stripped and climbed bone tired into bed.

Jay Dee awoke. Although it seemed he had been asleep for only five minutes, weak sunlight filtered in around the mis-hung curtains.

Catalina stood, naked and shadowy, in the doorway.

"It's morning," she said.

Jay Dee hissed. "Jesus, Cat, go away —"

"Oh, let the poor girl in."

"Trace?"

"Shut up and slide over."

"I really do appreciate this, guys. Guy, I mean." Catalina giggled. "And girl."

Mr. Boots joined them later, when things had quieted down.

Around noon, when Catalina was in the shower, Jay Dee said, "I don't know how many more nights like that I can take."

"Oh, don't pretend with me. You loved it."

"No, I ain't kidding. You're plenty of woman for me, Trace. Tossing Catalina into the pot is like adding fudge on top of butterscotch. It's just too much sweetness. And Lord, that girl would wear a mule out! No, we got to fix her up with someone fast."

Tracey came to sit in Jay Dee's lap. "I'm glad to hear you feel like that, Jay Dee. I don't mind comforting the poor thing for a while, but I'd hate to think you wanted to make it permanent."

Jay Dee leered. "Well, maybe we don't have to exactly rush to find her a man."

"Jerk!"

At their car, Tracey made to enter by the passenger's side, out of long habit, till Jay Dee stopped her. He conducted her to the driver's door and, with mock elegance, opened it for her.

"Why, thank you, sir."

Seated next to Tracey, Jay Dee looked over his shoulder for Catalina. Missing.

She stood outside the car, waiting patiently.

Jay Dee sighed, got out, and opened her door for her.

"Why, thank you kindly, Mr. McGhee."

They had a late breakfast at the truck-stop diner named SHECKLEY'S MIRACLE CAFE, and discussed their plans.

"Basically, Trace, I see us getting as far away from this crummy state as we can, out to where no one knows nothing about us, and settling down to a life of leisure. A nice big house, some land, maybe even some animals. Nothing too fancy. Swimming pool, maybe. And Cat — we'll set you up in a similar place, and you can send for your kids."

Tracey clinked her coffee cup down. "Sounds good to me."

"Me, too," chimed in Catalina. "You can just fetch me a little old shat-

The Cadillac was driven by a moose with its antlers sawed off, three faceless men in the backseat —

toe from France or someplace and plunk it down next to a private beach."

"Oh man, Catalina, get real! Wouldn't you stick out then like a tick on a bald dog's butt? You don't think your neighbors — not to mention the cops, the reds, and anyone else you'd care to name — wouldn't get a little suspicious when they woke up and saw a house sprung up overnight like a toadstool? No, the safest thing to take is money, and just buy what we want, like any other person who never earned their cash."

"Oh, right. I see."

"So are we agreed that's what we're gonna do? Great. But there's one little personal matter I wanna attend to first."

Tracey looked dubious. "What?"

"Never you mind. You'll see soon enough. Now, let's get going."

Out in the parking lot, while Tracey was unlocking the Lincoln, Jay Dee watched the traffic stream past. Toyotas, Fords, Hondas, Saabs, a Cadillac driven by a moose with its antlers sawed off, three faceless men in the backseat —

"Just saw Larry," said Jay Dee, once they were in the car and on the road. "He seemed to be heading for the city."

Tracey pulled into the breakdown lane and stopped. "Let's turn around, Jay Dee."

"Fraid not. That's where our chore is. Don't worry: nothing's gonna happen. City's a big place."

"I don't feel good about this, Jay Dee, but I know better than to argue with you when you got your mind made up. . . ."

"You hear that, Cat?"

"Yes, master." The plump woman made a mock bow. "Salami and baloney."

"Hunh."

In the city, Jay Dee directed, "Pick up Fourth at Main and head east."

"The meat-packing district, right? Jay Dee, I never claimed to be a genius, but a person would have to be senile, blind, deaf, and have her head up her ass not to be able to figure out your pitiful schemes. You're going after Gene, aren't you?"

"That's right. I reckon we still owe him a little something for all the grief he put you through."

"Give it up, Jay Dee! I learned to. Gene don't mean nothing to me no more, good nor bad. I put all that pain behind me when I met you."

"You are a saint, Trace, and I love you for it. However, it is more in accord with my personal nature to be a little less forgiving. Not only does it require less willpower, but it can be downright satisfying to the soul."

"All right. But if you get your head handed to you don't say I didn't warn you."

Jay Dee patted the remote in his pocket. "I think this little equalizer here will prevent such a sad occurrence."

Catalina, quiet till now, said, "I agree with Jay Dee. It's not good to bottle up your feelings. Sometimes it's like trying to put a cork in a volcano."

Jay Dee snorted. "Good comparison in your case, Cat."

"Hey, let's keep this conversation above the belt."

A district of brick warehouses assembled itself around them. Most still retained their old industrial tenants; a few buildings, however, had been vacated and retrofitted for new occupants. On the ground level of one such, a sign was hung.

GENE SMITH'S WORLD-CLASS GYM
NAUTILUS, STAIRMASTER, SPARRING
SHOWERS AVAILABLE AT EXTRA COST

They parked in front and got out, leaving Mr. Boots meowing aggrievedly in the car. He seemed to be saying, I want to get in on this, too!

Jay Dee clutched the remote so tight his knuckles were white as cream cheese.

"If you're scared, Jay Dee, it's not too late to leave."

Jay Dee stiffened right up. "C'mon. We're going in."

The gym was a large, open space with equipment scattered around the floor, a boxing ring in the middle. Many of the machines were in use. In the rink, two men were sparring.

"One of them Gene?" whispered Cat.

"No," answered Tracey. "That's him punching the bag."

Gene Smith wore only a pair of spandex shorts and some unlaced sneakers. He sported short black curls and an NFL-style mustache. His body looked like that of a gorilla that someone had tried to shave — with only partial success. The sound of his bare fists pummeling the bag sounded like a hail of hams striking the roof of a circus tent.

"Oo-whee, he's a hunk!"

"He's a pig-ignorant macho shit," countered Jay Dee. "It just ain't apparent if you let your hormones do your thinking, like Tracey done."

"I beg your pardon."

Gene spotted the visitors. He ceased his flurry of blows and came over to them, massaging one hand in the other.

"Well, if it ain't Mrs. Smith. Oh, I forgot. It always hadda be 'Thorne-Smith,' didn't it? I never could knock that crap out of your head."

"Nor never will."

Gene smiled. "I had a feeling you'd be showing up here, after I read about you this morning."

"Read about me?"

"Why, sure. Didn't you hear yet? The police got a few questions to ask you, about how the First National roof ended up on top of that dump you were living in."

"Oh Jesus. . . ."

"Well, I guess you can hide out with me. Though we'll have to get a few house rules straight first. Hell, I'll even put your buddies up, too. Who are they, anyhow? Your little brother and his old lady, maybe?"

"Old lady? I ain't nobody's old lady, kiddo."

"And I'm Tracey's man, you asshole. The man you never was."

Gene smiled cruelly. "Is that so? Well, looks like we're gonna need one less place setting than it first appeared."

Cracking his knuckles, Gene advanced on Jay Dee, towering over him like a falling building.

"Hold on a minute — I ain't quite resolved what to do with you yet. . . ."

"That's O.K., baby. I know what to do with you."

"Shit, this is moving too fast — Box, get me a cube!"

A small silver cube appeared in midair behind Gene, who now had one massive fist cocked level with Jay Dee's nose.

"Bigger, bigger!"

The cube expanded to man size.

"Open it!"

The cube's vertical face swung out. Jay Dee lowered his head and ran forward, ramming Gene in the midriff. Taken by surprise, the big man lurched a couple of steps backward. His calves caught on the sill of the cube, and he toppled backward into its capacious interior.

"Close it up! Quick!"

The cube snapped shut and shrank along eleven dimensions.

From outside the gym came the sound of several car doors slamming. Catalina went to the window to look. When she turned around, her face was drained of blood.

"It's Larry and the smudge-faces. And there's some other guys — with guns."

"You told Larry all about Gene, I take it," said Jay Dee calmly to Tracey.

"A girl's gotta get some things off her chest, even if the person listening is a jerk."

"Well, can't change the past. We'll just have to deal with 'em. Let's go out, where we can move."

They opened the door and filed out, hands raised high.

As Jay Dee had seen from a distance, Larry had sawed off his cumbersome antlers. Otherwise, his long and hairy moose's visage was unaltered, attesting to the permanency of the Master Remote's changes.

The moose opened his mouth; sometime during the past night, Larry had mastered — to a degree — his new vocal apparatus.

"Gib muh back muh faaaace," he brayed. A long thread of slobber drooled from his jaw with the effort.

"Larry, I'm plumb sorry, but I can't. The most I could do — if I wanted to — is to give you and your buddies somebody else's face. But I can't restore your own familiar ugly puss. But listen, why do you want to change? Before, you were just another mean and undistinguished son of a bitch. Now you're unique."

Larry raised a gun and began to squeeze the trigger. One of the new syndicate goons batted his arm down. The bullet ricocheted off the pavement.

"Listen, wise guy — I don't know how you done this to Livermore or my bosses, but you better put them right. Or there'll be big trouble for you and these dumb broads."

"This is the second time today I've been called an insulting name," complained Catalina. "I don't like it."

"Me neither," said Tracey. "Jay Dee — watcha gonna do about it?"

Jay Dee lowered one arm to his side and with his free hand scratched his head. "Well, I guess I'll have to come down on those jerks like a ton of bricks. Box, the cars!"

An enormous shower of bricks fell from nowhere, completely crushing and burying all the syndicate cars, including Larry's prized Cadillac.

For a moment the only sound was the clink of a few tumbling bricks. Then, almost but not quite simultaneously, Jay Dee and the head goon yelled.

"Wall!"

"Shoot!"

A twelve-foot cinder-block barrier topped with razor wire and including a portion of guard tower intervened between Jay Dee and the women and the toughs. The barrier ran across the whole street, from building to building. Futile gunfire echoed behind it.

"I borrowed part of the local incarceration facility, as I judged these men were lawbreakers. I hope it is suitable. . . ."

Jay Dee laughed. "Sure should be an interesting scene at the old exercise yard! Let's go."

In the car the remote said, "I feel I am coming to understand your commands much better. A growing empathy now exists between us."

"I love you, too. O.K., Trace, pick up the interstate. We got what we came for. The garbage is in the can. We just gotta figure out the best way to dispose of it."

They were on the outskirts of town when the sirens began to wail. Just as they were pulling onto the entrance ramp to the expressway, a bevy of police cruisers screeched through an intersection and, spotting the Lincoln, converged like pouncing panthers.

"Flower to the spirit," said Tracey enigmatically, before stomping on the accelerator and rocking Catalina, Jay Dee, and Mr. Boots back into their seats. The big car leaped up the ramp, narrowly missing a tiny Honda bearing a pack of Cub Scouts and den mother as it merged into the freeway traffic.

The cops were soon behind them.

Stiff-armed, Captain Tracey whipped the land cruiser through the

crowded sea-lanes as her passengers turned green. Cars swerved onto the road's shoulder and collided with Jersey barriers. Still the sirens pursued them, all her maneuvers failing to shake the squad of cop cars.

"Time for tougher tactics," said Jay Dee. "Box, can you make those ribbons like elastics?"

"Would you care to specify the Poisson ratio or the strain/stress dyadics?"

"No, man, I wouldn't! Just string a big, tough elastic band across the road to stop the cops."

"Done."

Tracey cautiously slowed. Jay Dee looked back.

A wide golden ribbon bisected the highway, anchored to the median barrier and the roadside fence. As Jay Dee watched, its rubbery surface bulged in the shape of four car noses. Instead of braking, the stubborn drivers continued to race their engines. The belt strained forward, bowing out from its anchor points.

Realizing they were getting nowhere, the cops lifted their feet from the accelerators.

Released, the band snapped the cars backward. There was the sound of tires shredding and exploding, and the crunch of metal and glass.

"Oo-who!" wailed Jay Dee. "Just like the slingshot I had when I was a kid!"

"I'm glad you're having fun," said Tracey, removing one hand from the wheel and flexing her fingers. "But I do wish you'd learn to drive, Jay Dee, just so we could share moments like this."

"You know, I flunked the road test five times, Trace. I just ain't got the right skills somehow. But if I was perfect, you couldn't live with me."

"You may not believe this, Jay Dee, but I find it hard to live with you sometimes anyhow."

Catalina spoke. "Flower to the spirit?"

Tracey smiled. "Pedal to the metal."

They cruised slowly on, laughing and recounting the chase to themselves.

* * *

At the next on-ramp, three more cruisers sat with engines purring.

"Shit!"

Tracey got a good lead on them, since they had to accelerate from zero.

"Another ribbon, Jay Dee?"

"Variety is the goddamn spice of my life, hon. Box, do you think you can do this. . . ?" Jay Dee whispered with the Master Remote close to his lips.

"Surely."

The road beneath their rear tires disappeared into a trench with a forty-five-degree slope. The police vehicles went helplessly over the lip and down. Within seconds there issued forth a loud, glutinous plop, a sound between a belch and an underwater fart.

"What's at the bottom?"

"Enough molasses to float a battleship."

"Sweet."

"Do you think," asked Catalina, "they might know by now what our car looks like?"

"Gotcha. Trace, pull over a minute. Great. Box, can you smudge this car with us in it, without smudging us?"

"Your morphic resonances are now locked into my sheldrake."

"Uh, good. Go to it."

They were sitting on solid nothing. The windows had gone to impenetrable nothing, so they were blind to the world.

"Jesus, I didn't count on not being able to see. . . . Box, peel us off a new appearance from what's passing. Something inconspicuous."

The world reappeared. They were sitting in a commercial van. From the rear came a highly suspicious reek, emanating from many canvas drawstringed bags.

Tracey craned her head out her window. "Baylock and Powers Diaper Service," she reported smugly. "Good going."

"Just drive."

Several times, packs of police cars raced past them, oblivious to the laundry van. During these moments, Jay Dee and Catalina hid in the back while Tracey drove.

"Jay Dee, don't the smell of a wet baby just get to you in a certain way? It's so earthy, like. It makes me all quivery inside. . . ."

"Well, it makes me wanna puke, so keep your hands where they belong."

They passed some cruisers drawn up to the side of the road.

"What's going on, Trace?"

"They're rounding up some escaped prisoners. Maybe we should take out another chunk of important wall someplace, just to keep them busy."

"I'll think on it."

Pretty soon they had crossed the state line. A road sign announced:

JETER'S LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA
CAMPING, BOATING, SKIING

"Jeter's Lake," said Tracey wistfully. "I haven't been there since I was a kid."

"Last time I was there, I was too pregnant to fit into a swimsuit. Leastwise, any I'd wanna be seen in."

"Well, hell, let's stop. I could enjoy some peace and quiet."

Tracey took the appropriate exit. The secondary road began to curve under arcades of firs. Soft sunlight dappled the van's interior, and a balsalmy scent began to compete with the odor of a quarter ton of cotton-wrapped, pee-soaked baby shit.

A rustic wooden sign heralded the park's drive. The entrance fee was three dollars, which they paid to a Smokey the Bear-hatted ranger who regarded their van with frank curiosity.

"On our lunch break," offered Tracey.

"It's mighty hard work," contributed Jay Dee.

"A regular calling, though," Catalina affirmed.

Down a narrow paved road to a half-empty lot surrounded by forest. Once parked, they eagerly climbed out. Catalina carried Mr. Boots.

"Lord, I got to clean out my lungs! Let's head down to the water. . . ."

The forest gradually fell away to reveal an extensive body of sparkling water surrounded by tall hills, two of which were partially denuded, their ski trails now grassy, the lifts immobile. A small man-made beach, occupied by a few sunbathers, stretched to left and right; several red-stained log structures held changing rooms, showers, rest rooms, and a small snack bar—*cum*-grocery. Beyond the swimming area was a dock occupied by several rowboats, canoes, and outboards.

Spying the boats, Tracey said, "Oh Jay Dee, let's see if we can rent one. It'd be so nice to be out on the water."

Beneath the sign that said "Rates: \$5/hr, \$10 deposit" sat an old codger who looked carved out of an inferior grade of wood. His chair was tipped back, his hat was down over his eyes, and a dead pipe was held firmly between his teeth, indicating, if not life, then at least recent rigor mortis.

"Hey, fella, can we rent a boat?"

The ancient relic slowly raised a hand to lift his cap. He squinted suspiciously at the trio with one eye before declaring, "All taken."

"All taken? What're those?"

"Ree-zerved." He dropped his cap.

"Reserved, huh? No problem."

Jay Dee took out the Master Remote. "Window." A square plane appeared in midair. In it was portrayed a posh marina, numerous yachts abob at their berths. "Girls?"

"That one's cute."

A sudden wave swept over the shore. Half the boats tethered at the dock capsized and sank. At the end of the pier rode a proud forty-foot yacht, chrome gleaming, wood polished, radar turret aimed at the horizon. It bore the name *The Bishop's Jaegers*.

Startled by the commotion, the codger glanced out from beneath his cap. He jerked upright, his chair went out from under him, and he toppled backward.

Luckily, no one was aboard their new vessel; Mr. Boot's prowling through every hatch would surely have aroused them. Quickly mastering the controls, Tracey swung the vessel about, demolishing the dock with élan.

They stopped in the middle of the lake and dropped anchor.

"Now we can relax," said Jay Dee.

Catalina said, "I want to go swimming, don't you? But we don't have suits."

"So? Go bare-ass. Nobody can see you from the shore, 'less it's some bird-watcher with his binoculars."

Catalina pouted prettily.

"Cat, are you trying to pretend you got any modesty left, after what you ee-nitiated last night?"

"No, it don't have nothing to do with modesty. It's just fashion. I like to dress nice, whatever the occasion."

"Oh, all right. But it's a waste of energy, if you ask me." A concerned

look blossomed on Jay Dee's features. "Box, your batteries ain't running low, are they?"

"I have extrinsic sources of power several magnitudes greater than your era's annual energy budget."

"Oh good. Well, let's see some nice bathing suits for the ladies, then."

Soon Tracey and Catalina were clad in the outfits they had selected, complete down to sunglasses, floppy hats, and Grecian sandals laced up their charming legs. Jay Dee had been convinced to don a pair of flower-print, baggy shorts.

"I feel like a goddamn idiot."

"No, you look sharp, Jay Dee."

"Mighty attractive."

Jay Dee smiled. "Well, O.K., if you-all say so. But I'll look even better underwater, where no one can see these pants. Last one in's a talking moose!"

Jay Dee hurled himself over the side. Tracey and Catalina soon followed.

The trio splashed and stroked until they had had enough exercise and fun. They climbed an aluminum ladder back into the yacht. Belowdecks, in a luxurious cabin, they stripped off their clammy suits and began to towel themselves off.

"That's a horny ol' devil you got there on your arm, Jay Dee," observed Catalina.

"That ain't his arm you're holding, honey," reminded Tracey.

"So it ain't."

AN HOUR or two later, Jay Dee walked out on the deck, alone and clothed. Mr. Boots appeared from somewhere and began rubbing against Jay Dee's ankles. Jay Dee hefted the Master Remote with an expression of thoughtfulness on his face. Then he spoke to it.

"Box, what am I gonna do with that Catalina? She needs a steady man something wicked."

"You are a man."

"Not the kind of heavy-duty boyfriend she needs! And besides, I got Tracey."

"What about the man in the cube?"

"Gene? Oh, he's handsome enough, but he's too ornery and spiteful and conceited to wish on the worst bitch, let alone a nice girl like Cat. She did like his looks, though. . . . Nah, forget it! I — Boots! What the hell do you want?"

Mr. Boots had stretched up with his forelegs and was using Jay Dee as a scratching post. Jay Dee unhooked his claws and picked him up. "Look, go hang out with Catalina; she loves you —"

Jay Dee stopped dead. A smile big as a slice of watermelon grew on his face.

"Get me the cube with Gene in it," he ordered.

The cube appeared, hanging six feet off the ground.

"Dump him out."

Gene Smith fell out of the cube's missing bottom into a heap on the deck. He appeared quite dazed.

"I could see inside myself. . . ." he said. "Wherever I was, I could see inside myself. And around the whole world, too."

Gene spotted Jay Dee. "You. You did this to me." He began to climb to his feet.

"Smudge the cat."

Mister Boots went formless.

"Peel off Gene and layer him on Mr. Boots."

"Compensating for the extensive mass difference between origin and target will require my tapping a new source of power."

"Do it."

There was something casting a shadow between Jay Dee and the sun. Or so it seemed. He shaded his eyes and looked up.

The sun had a black notch cut into its circumference. Even as Jay Dee watched, the spot disappeared, reconquered by nuclear flares.

Two Genes stood on the deck. The original stopped in his tracks.

"It's me. . . . You turned that cat into me! You mother —"

"Smudge him."

There was a Gene-sized, eye-wrenching hole in the air.

"Now put that image of Mr. Boots you saved at the motel on him."

"This is inconvenient. I now have to dispose of extra mass that I could have used in the first transformation. You must learn to sequence your commands more rationally. . . ."

"Who's the boss here? Screw rational! Just do it!"

"How shall I dispose of the surplus mass?"

"I don't care what you do as long as you don't mess with the sun no more. That's too spooky. Just dump it somewhere."

"Very well." The box paused. "Your planet's satellite now has a new crater, its largest. Shall I inform the proper authorities, so that you retain the right to name it?"

"No!"

Jay Dee looked at the two other living creatures on the deck.

Mr. Boots — wearing Gene's appearance — tentatively raised one hairy, muscled arm into his line of sight, then began to lick it.

Gene — on all furry fours — bent his body to look at his hindquarters. He yowled, and launched himself at Jay Dee.

"Ribbons!"

The cat thumped to the deck, neatly packaged. It continued to hiss and spit.

Tracey emerged, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "Jay Dee, what's all this noy—" She froze. "Gene, you're free —"

"It ain't Gene, Trace." Jay Dee explained.

"Oh. My. God. Jay Dee, it's inhuman!"

"Sure. But 'inhuman' just might be what Catalina needs. C'mon, let's introduce 'em."

Tracey and Jay Dee each took one of Mr. Boot's arms and walked him forward. The man-cat moved shakily, as if unused to the articulation of its new joints, walking on its tiptoes.

They guided Mr. Boots down to the cabin.

Catalina stirred when they entered.

When Mr. Boots recognized her, he began to purr. The front of his shorts bulged.

"Jay Dee, Tracey, what —"

"It's Mr. Boots, Cat. He needs some petting."

"Nice kitty — oh!"

Tracey and Jay Dee sat in deck chairs, holding hands. The yacht had stopped rocking a few minutes ago. They silently contemplated the sinking sun, apparently none the worse for its loan of energy to Mr. Boots. Then Jay Dee spoke.

"You know what, Trace?"

"No, what?"

"Life can be good."

"Sometimes you forget, though."

"Course we forget. Why shouldn't we, the way we live? People like us, we rush from one bad day to another, never having enough money, usually sick, stuck in dead-end jobs. We're forced by life and society to forget what we were born for."

"To mix men and cats in a blender?"

"You wanna hear my philosophy or not? O.K. No, to have fun! To enjoy ourselves without worrying about where the rent money's gonna come from. To laugh more than we cry. To relax our nerves and unknot our brains. To help our friends and confound our enemies. And this little box lets us do just that. Why, everybody should have one!"

At that moment a car bounced down the access road that led to the now-empty beach. It stopped in a spray of sand right at the water's edge. Among others, a moose-headed man emerged and began to fire his pistol futilely at *The Bishop's Jaegers*.

"Well, almost everyone." Jay Dee got up. "C'mon, Trace, let's go."

"Where to?"

"Try the far side of the lake. Seems to me I remember Route 10 passing near there."

They upped anchor and motored off.

As they drew closer to the far shore, they could make out the highway guardrail running along the top of the banking raised a few feet above the lake's surface.

When they were about a hundred yards offshore, sirens began to sound. Soon the guardrail was lined with squad cars, their roof lights flashing patriotic colors.

"Shit! If only we wasn't stuck on this boat! If only we had wheels!"

"Done," said the remote.

"Wait a minute. That wasn't a real wish —"

"Jay Dee, the ship's handling funny —"

"You don't figure — Trace, I got a hunch. Head straight for the shore."

As the yacht approached the road, more and more of it emerged from the water. But instead of grounding to a halt, its keel embedded in the bottom, it moved steadily forward.

Catalina came up from below.

"Where's Gene? I mean, Mr. Boots?"

"Catnap. What's going on? Oh, I see. . . ."

A cop began to yell threats through a bullhorn. He sounded less than sanguine.

Now enormous, weed-wrapped wheels, big as those on a monster truck, showed beneath the boat. Apparently the undercarriage of some large vehicle had been melded to the yacht, and the drivetrain integrated with its big engines.

The nose of the ship reared up as its treads bit into the sloping shore. Gripping the wheel, Tracey kept her feet; Jay Dee and Catalina were thrown against the walls of the bridge. Mr. Boots — Gene, rather, and still in ribbons — slid back along the deck to thump solidly against the stern.

The monster wheels crushed the guardrail first, then the hood of a cop car. Tracey throttled up to climb the junk. The rear wheels bit solidly. Then they were onto the road.

The land yacht began to trundle off at approximately twenty-five miles per hour.

Bullets were pinging off the ship's superstructure.

"Shall I give our craft a more conventional appearance?"

"Fuck that! They got me mad now, shooting at us like that, ruining our good times. I want everyone who comes after us stopped permanently. But without hurting them."

"May I recommend a glueball? I use only the highest-quality gluons. . . ."

"Sure, if it'll do the trick."

Inside the Master Remote, a golden sphere materialized, just as the letters on its case once had, a short twenty-four hours ago. But when the sphere reached the surface, it kept on coming, emerging somehow through the intact remote.

Jay Dee held the marble-sized glueball. "This is gonna stop people from bothering us?"

"Once it is activated, yes, certainly."

"What should I do?"

"Throw it at your pursuers."

Jay Dee leaned cautiously out the bridge and tossed it.

The glueball landed atop a police car.

The car was gone. Or rather, it was plastered flat onto the surface of the glueball, which had swelled to accommodate it. The flat policemen inside the car banged their hands on their windows. One opened his door

and emerged to slide around on the surface of the sphere.

The next car to touch the sphere vanished faster than the eye could follow, flattened likewise to the face of the glueball. The ball was bigger than before.

Lacking brakes, Tracey throttled down to nothing. The yacht coasted to a stop.

The glueball occupied the whole road. There were no cars left outside it. They all rolled around its surface like rainbows on a soap bubble.

Now the glueball began to move.

It rolled away from the yacht, toward the city.

Everything it touched — including the road, down to a depth of ten inches — was sucked into it. Trees, guardrail, grass, birds. The sphere swelled and swelled, like a snowball rolling down an alpine slope, leaving a cleanly sheared path of destruction.

"Holy shit. . . . Stop it!"

"That is beyond my capacities."

"Beyond your — You stupid machine! Why did you let it loose, then?"

"I am Turing degree three. Humans are Turing degree ten."

"Oh Jesus. Will it ever get full, like, and stop?"

"How big is this planet?"

The glueball was now six stories tall. It seemed to be moving faster.

Catalina was sobbing. "Jay Dee —," began Tracey. But the anguished expression on his face made her stop.

Something appeared in the darkening air above the sphere.

Jay Dee swung the ship's searchlight on it.

It was the man they had run over, the owner of the Master Remote.

Suddenly there were a dozen of him. They formed a ring around the glueball. It stopped. It began to shrink, but did not disgorge what it had eaten.

When the glueball was marble-sized again, all the floating men coalesced into a single individual. He landed on the ground, picked up the glueball, and pocketed it.

Then he was on the yacht.

"Uh, sorry we killed you once, Mr. Spaceman."

The man brushed some dust off his rubberoid lapels. "I am as human as you, Mr. McGhee. I am a resident of your future."

Catalina had ceased crying. "Juh-gee, you must come from pretty far in the future."

"Fifty years," said the man. "But they're going to be wild ones. Now, may I have back my unit?"

Jay Dee surrendered the Master Remote.

Tracey asked, "How come you didn't arrive one second after you were killed to claim it, and prevent all this mess?"

"The unit disturbs the Fredkin continuum in a chaotic manner. I had a hard time zeroing in on it."

"What's going to happen to us?" said Jay Dee.

"Oh, nothing much. Say, did you ever see a tie like this?"

They all stared at the time traveler's paisley tie. The border of each paisley was made of little paisleys, and those were made of littler paisleys, and those were made of even littler paisleys, on and on and on, forever —

That night the Li'l Bear Inn was as crowded as the last copter out of Saigon.

Above the sounds of clicking pool balls, thwacking darts, ringing bells, exploding aliens, kazoo, farts, Hank, Jr., and the bug zapper hung outside the screen door that gave onto the gravel parking lot, the calls for drinks were continuous.

"Tracey, two shots!"

"Tracey, another pitcher!"

"Tracey, six rum 'n' Cokes!"

The woman behind the bar smiled at the deluge of orders. It meant more profits in her till.

A man with two tattoos emerged from the back office. "Catalina just called, Trace. She's stopping by soon as Gene gets off work at the exterminator's."

Tracey said, "It'll be good to see her. I'll have a frozen daiquiri and a saucer of cream ready."

The man looked around. "Lord, it's jumping tonight. We should be able to pay off the mortgage next month."

A large, neutered tomcat stepped fastidiously among the pools of spilled beer. A patron reached down to pet it. It hissed and scratched the offered hand.

"Jay Dee, you should get rid of that mean animal!"

Jay Dee just smiled.

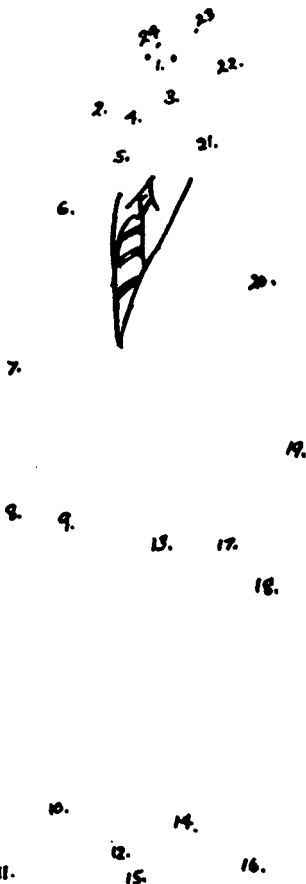
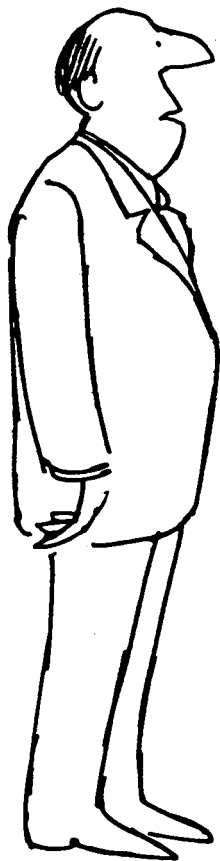
There was a muffled noise from the moose head mounted on the wall

behind the bar. The moose head had a rope tied around its snout. Its eyes tracked furiously.

Jay Dee gave Tracey a kiss. "I'll relieve you in a minute, hon. But I got to do something first."

He went back into the private office on the far side of the bar, picked up a board —

— and gave Larry another whack on the ass.



"If you intend to make a go of it in this job, Parmenter, You've got to get connected."



A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

DOING SCIENCE

THERE WAS a time when the scientist had two principal public images: the starry-eyed, impractical, professorial type, like Einstein, or else the narrow, lab-smock-and-steely-eyed monomaniac. Times have changed.

Since the atom bomb ushered scientists onto the world stage as major players, many scientists have tried to project an air of majesty and certitude, a lofty public facade. The experience of actually "doing" science, though, is more hectic, varied and odd than scientific shamans allow.

For the last twenty-five years I have been collecting incidents and reflections from my own life that belie the self-portraits we usually get. Though rearranged and polished, I suspect these nuggets are closer to the lived truth than solemn biographies suggest.

* * *

1.

My first summer job after getting my Bachelor's degree was at the Naval Research Laboratory in Corona, California. I was twenty-two, ambitious, my head aswirl in seductively smooth theory. My first task was to modify an experimental apparatus. I studied the maze of wires and arcane devices carefully, deciding precisely which moves to make in which order, so that I minimized the risk of getting things mixed up. Gingerly, I removed a part. I replaced some worn connections, made adjustments. Things were going well. Then I cut a wire. There was a loud boom, sparks, and all the lights went out. Technicians came running and immediately saw the problem. I had never noticed that the device was still plugged in, and I had shorted out all the high-voltage lines in the building. I was lucky to be alive. Thereafter I placed less faith in my fresh degree and more in horse sense.

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2.

In the early 1960s the scientific establishment was firmly rooted on the east coast. Many who had made the A-bomb were still in their prime there. The halls of Princeton, Cornell and Harvard were held to be more old world, mannerly and sophisticated than the campuses in California. When I went to hear my first colloquium at the University of California, San Diego, I could tell the speaker, who was from Princeton, from our professors, who went around in shirt sleeves, even shorts. A fellow graduate student from Cornell whispered to me, "Look at that three-piece suit! They know something about *dignity* back there." He had found California far too casual and afterward moved back to New York. We were all impressed. To this day, if lecturing to more than thirty people, I wear a tie. But then the colloquium speaker, who had been writing some notes on the board before his talk, turned to be introduced. He was startled at the wry, west-coast chuckles which greeted him. Although immaculately dressed, he had left his fly open.

3.

Occasionally I publish novels, though I spend most of my time on research and teaching. While I have never had anyone accuse me of lifting their ideas and using them

in stories, one writer warned me in no uncertain terms against taking ideas from his stories and publishing them in scientific journals.

4.

Consulting for Physics International, Inc. in the late 1960s, I tried to think of novel ways to use electron beams of high currents — over a hundred thousand Amperes. There aren't many practical uses, it turns out. Physics International's powerful accelerators drove electrons very close to the speed of light, where effects of relativity become important. Somebody suggested that these relativistic particles might age ordinary matter. I suspect this was based on a misunderstanding of Einstein's relativistic time dilation effect, in which objects moving near light speed appear to age more slowly. Enthusiasm was high, however, and we did the experiment. We bombarded a bottle of screw-cap wine with several bursts of high current, being careful not to shatter the bottle. Drinking the wine at about 7 PM, without having eaten lunch, I would have sworn that the electrons improved the bouquet. Subsequent studies did not confirm this result, though.

5.

Repeatedly, while editing papers

of mine, the editors of scientific journals strike out "I think" and substitute "It is hypothesized that;" replace "I found" with "It was shown in later experiments that," and so on. They won't let you own up to your own findings. They hate "I" and love the passive voice.

6.

I was once paid to settle an argument over whether the moon is round.

7.

In 1984 I visited the Very Large Array radio telescope to do research. The Array is a family of parabolic antennas spread across an ancient lake bed high in the mountains of New Mexico. I was helping to interpret observations of vast jets of energetic material, which are ejected from far galaxies. The radio dishes cup upward toward these invisible, slender threads and produce glorious colored maps. A half hour's receiving time can produce a squiggly jet map which theorists like me can spend a year trying to figure out. Tired, we finished our observing run and began discussing baseball, the sport of intellectuals. There was some disagreement over an interesting game being played in Chicago. Talk became less scholarly, more firmly voiced. Two Cubs fans, a notoriously irrational breed,

insisted on offering such high odds that the rest of us couldn't resist betting. Within a few minutes, the astronomers had swiveled one of the massive radio dishes not in use at the moment. They quickly found the right spot on the horizon and made some minor adjustments. There, on a side screen, the game leaped into life. Viewing was excellent. For one of our visiting Australian astronomers, the proceedings were about as intelligible as the galactic jets had been. It was stimulating to watch, knowing that the signal from Chicago had been picked up and amplified a billion-fold by a system costing a hundred million dollars.

8.

I know a physicist who came into an office where five men were arguing a mathematical point. Nobody could do the calculation in question. The physicist studied it for a long moment, and then announced that the quantity to be evaluated was probably between five and ten. Later, a laborious numerical calculation proved him right; it was 8.6. As time went by the physicist came to accept as true the reputation this incident gave him. He used it to get him a promotion in his firm's research group. Using the same canny judgment, he quickly made the company a mil-

lion dollars in new grants. Then, just as quickly, he lost five million.

9.

Professors everywhere deplore exams as an archaic technique, a fossil that recalls little red school-houses and memorizing the capitals of all the states. Regular progress and daily diligence matter more, they say, not an hour spent compressing months of learning onto a few sheets of paper. Far better to stress homework, classroom participation, term papers and the professor's judgment. None of these sentiments keep the professoriat from devising exams which cause sleepless cram sessions, caffeine addiction and bleak despair. The challenge is to find problems which will furrow any student's brow while still being perfectly defensible as straightforward, clear, and illustrating a central topic thoroughly explored in class. It is hard work, but rewarding. And surely, several thousand dazed and tired young men and women are signs of a job well done.

10.

Popularizing science is harder than it looks. Carl Sagan has proved that it is a craft teetering between the sublime and the glitzy. Lewis Thomas's crisp, compact essays rival the best of our time. Other

prominent scientists such as Fred Hoyle have taken less conventional paths. I had admired Hoyle's novel *The Black Cloud*, which depicts the reaction of the scientific community as a large cloud enters the solar system, with vast effects. Hoyle told me that he regarded writing as a necessary evil, and therefore took as little time with it as possible. For his novel he had first laid everything out in his head, then cleared a free week. He sat down and wrote the entire book in a concerted rush, uninterrupted except by food and sleep. Otherwise, he said, it would have squandered too much of his productive research time. Others, like Isaac Asimov, gradually dropped their scientific work and wrote more and more. Asimov eventually left Boston University (except for a single yearly appearance, to retain his title of professor) to produce over 400 books. Scientist-authors must wedge their writing into tight schedules, which makes the recent spate of excellent work surprising. We are seeing a golden age of scientific writing. I suspect this is another symptom of the growing influence of the internationalist scientific community as holders of values differing from those of nation-states.

* * *

11.

In 1984 my wife began to suffer greatly from kidney disease. Her decline was slow and agonizing, with side effects — loss of concentration, yellowish skin color, passing dizziness — appearing at first occasionally, but always returning. Somehow her winding-down was unreal for me. I could not truly believe that soon her kidneys would stop working altogether and she would have to go on dialysis. There had always been delays, she was doing much better than her doctors had predicted, and this insulated us both. I felt a need to get my hands on something concrete, something beyond the mild, sympathetic but often vague responses of the doctors. I asked her specialist for her lab summaries over the past several years. I plotted the chemical fractions in her blood vs. time, without knowing what they meant diagnostically. Most showed slow changes with lots of random ups and downs. The concentration of one, though, followed a smooth, exponential curve. I called up her specialist and asked how high this fraction could go without beginning dialysis. He gave me the number and I drew a straight line on my graph. It intersected the upward swoop of my curve three months into the future. At that moment I felt an odd sense of relief. The

worse news was made better by being predictable, crisply sure, and for me somehow more natural. The curve was accurate to within a week, though by then of course the fact was little consolation.

12.

I once spent hours in an oral examination of a thesis student in particle physics. We listened to a careful explanation of why the candidate had done a complicated numerical study of a problem. He quickly convinced me that he had certainly sweated enough to earn the doctorate. Then a member of the examining committee spoke up. He used a deceptive style I have seen the best employ: "I just can't understand this point . . . can you straighten me out on . . . I'm missing something . . ." and so on. From behind this modest veil he extracted the kernel of the thesis in clear form. Then he went to the blackboard. In three minutes he made a simple, deft mathematical argument. It yielded the same answer as the sizable numerical analysis, which had taken a year's labor. He sat down. The room was completely silent for a long time. The committee eventually decided to give the candidate his degree, but I have never seen such terror on a student's face before or since.

* * *

13.

In the early 1980s I was a member of the Citizens' Advisory Council on Space Policy, which recommended to the administration in 1982 that President Reagan stress defense as an alternative to the unending offensive arms race. I thought this was prudent and forward-looking; an offense-only posture had spurred decades of multiplying warheads. I certainly didn't expect that the President would seize the issue. It soon swelled to gargantuan proportions, spawning the Strategic Defense Initiative and dividing the scientific community more than any question in decades.

I was also present when Robert Heinlein attended a Council meeting in 1984. Heinlein had written many moving works of fiction about the early exploration of space, inspiring generations of scientists and engineers. Out of the shimmering summer heat came a surprise visitor — Arthur C. Clarke, in Los Angeles to promote the opening of the film made from his novel, *2010*. Clarke had proposed the communications satellite shortly after World War II. In 1950 he described an electromagnetic catapult to launch cargo from the surface of the moon. This idea evolved into the "mass driver" now being studied for use as a fast machine gun to shoot down ICBMs

— an area in which the USSR has done much work. Clarke had testified before congress against SDI; he felt that sullying space with weapons, even defensive ones, was a violation of his life's vision. It took only moments before Clarke and Heinlein squared off in a quick, fiery debate. Heinlein accused Clarke of "British arrogance." They had both long believed in the High Church of Space, yet they could find no common ground when the realities of human expansion intruded. This mirrored the acrimony which soon laced SDI debates overall — scientists were no better than others at separating technical judgments from political opinions. It was a sad moment for many when Clarke said a quiet goodbye and slipped into his limousine, stunned. The adolescence of the Space Age had passed.

14.

Some scientists still relish the romantic, 19th century image which equated scientists with eccentric, lone artists who refused to heed society's norms. (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* perhaps began all this.) When I was visiting Harvard, my friend Sidney Coleman was asked to teach a class which met at 10 A.M. Sidney had always kept an odd schedule and treasured his eccentricities. He had a purple

three-piece suit and a quirky range of friends, most definitely including me. His reputation rested on his ascerbic criticisms of quantum field theories. One of his few indulgences of conventional wisdom had been when he followed the investment advice of friends in the Harvard Economics department, losing a lot of money. So it was with some relish that he turned down the assignment from the Physics Department, on grounds that he did not believe he could stay up that late.

15.

Generally, scientists are better at sex than they are at money. They don't talk much about either. When I was working on my doctorate in La Jolla, a prominent member of the physics department was carrying on an affair with two Frenchwomen who lived together. He did not seem to mind whether his wife discovered this. He took some pains, though, to be sure that one of his graduate students who lived near the women never saw him coming or going from their home.

16.

I visited the USSR for two weeks in 1984 as a guest of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The scientists were very cordial. They didn't have the drinking capacity of legend, but maybe, coming from California, I'm

used to a high standard. The only time my hosts seemed disturbed was when I produced a camera from a coat pocket while visiting a laboratory outside the city of Karkhov. I hadn't remembered to leave it at the hotel and it had never occurred to the physicists to ask for one at the gate. I left the camera in their reception hall and thought nothing more of it. In Moscow a few days later I took a cab back to the Academy of Sciences Hotel late at night. The driver spent the entire trip trying to exchange black market rubles for dollars. His rate of exchange got more and more generous as we approached the hotel. I said no and handed him three rubles for the fare. He gave it back, displaying a wallet containing thousands of rubles, saying "I deal only in big sums." His English was perfect. I then noticed that this "taxi" did not have a meter or a driver's ID, though it had the usual taxi markings on the outside. I got out hurriedly and walked toward the hotel. A man in a military uniform materialized from nowhere and began talking to the driver, gesturing at me, clearly angry. From inside the hotel I watched them talk, still glancing toward me, until finally the man walked away scowling and the car drove off. The next day, my Soviet colleagues were puzzled by the inci-

dent. They discounted my suspicion that it was a set-up. A visiting scientist would not be the target of such a thing, they said. I still thought it a bit odd. When I returned to my hotel that night I found that my bags had been searched and all my exposed film was gone.

17.

In my first year of graduate school, 1963, I did numerical, computer-centered calculations in nuclear physics. I liked the romance of how matter held together, how the regularities of the world came from details of how neutrons and protons got married. This led to my taking the advanced nuclear physics course from Maria Goeppert-Mayer, whose famous "shell" model of the nucleus had been a major achievement in the early 1950s. She was a shy, quiet lady, but nothing got by her. The next year she had a serious stroke which slurred her speech and made walking awkward. When she returned to teaching she asked the physics department for help with grading the problems in the same advanced course. Though I had a research assistantship and therefore no official teaching duties, the department chairman asked me to do it because Professor Mayer had asked for me by name and he wanted to make her task as easy as

possible. I did the grading, though by that time I had gotten more interested in solid state physics, and reported each week to her with finished problems. About six weeks into the course she became the first woman to receive a Nobel prize since Madam Curie. I had never seen the media descend upon a scientist before. I was rather appalled at how little the reporters bothered to prepare for an interview with her, and at the downright dopey questions. But she weathered this well, went to Stockholm, and returned rather weary. For the rest of the semester, each time I stopped by her office to hand in problem sets, she regaled me with details of the Nobel ceremony and celebrations, funny stories, oddities. Because of her speech difficulty she was even more shy. Another faculty member told me later that none of the other faculty had heard many of her wry, amusing stories about the Nobel experience; she seldom left her office any longer. I realized I had been very lucky. I went by to see her long after the nuclear physics course was over, and she talked about her epic days working with Enrico Fermi, at the height of her powers. The double tragedy of her stroke was that just when young women scientists could have used a vibrant and active role model, she was struck down. Except for her

Nobel address, she never again gave a major public speech. All too often this has been the case with the Nobels — the recipient is worn down by the time the slow-moving committee gets around to recognizing them. This is especially true of women.

18.

Not many scientists drink to excess; there is nothing harder to do while loaded than mathematics. Alcohol liberates the verbal, suppressing the analytical. Presumably this comes from chemical negotiations buried in our brains' wiring diagrams. It certainly helps explain why writers often hit the bottle heavily. (Kingsley Amis once remarked to me, "The best part is, you can bloody well *feel* it doing you damage.") Unfortunately, alcohol's reign is nowhere more firm than in mathematical physics. Some theorists I know avoid its blur entirely and won't even have wine with meals. I can feel a few glasses of wine kindle my verbal side, all right, but its first effect is a quick blunting of my mathematical sense. Still, several very prominent physicists were alcoholics. George Gamow died of it.

19.

I was once engaged to assess the movements of a man struck in the

eye by a .22 pistol slug. I determined that the body would have moved about a millimeter backward at most. In any case the slug's momentum could not explain why the body was found yards from the spot of the shooting. As I explained my findings on the witness stand, the prosecuting attorney spent much time on the minute aspects of my analysis. I drew sketches on a large display pad for the jury. I explained the geometry, Newton's equations, everything. The jury seemed mesmerized by the ornate detail. Everything proceeded in a fog of lawyerly obsessions. Throughout the rest of the trial, nobody brought up the mystery of the body's location. The District Attorney's office of Orange County paid me over a thousand dollars for my testimony. The jury never got to pass judgment, because the defendant's attorney made a deal with the prosecution for a lesser sentence. The trial focused on the physical dynamics because everybody was maneuvering around a central point, which the lawyers knew but I didn't. It turned out that the body had been moved by the victim's relatives to frame the defendant. The relatives were never prosecuted for it, though.

20.

At one of our great accelerator

labs in the 1970s, rivalry among experimenters was high. One team kept a TV camera trained on their high energy experiment, so they could use waldos to move equipment around. Late one night, two operators turned on the camera and saw the leader of another experiment enter their area, unzip, and pee with obvious relish all over their equipment. I was told this story while watching the leader himself give the American Physical Society an invited talk about his work. A few years later he won the Nobel Prize.

21.

A scientist in fiction typically confronts a big question which has a decisive answer, whereas in real life there is always too much data, too many possibilities, a mitigated end.

22.

Of physicists I have known, most did well on their qualifying examinations for the doctorate. This confirms the general methods physics departments use. But several of the most brilliant and original physicists I know did poorly at such exams, and two never took them at all. Freeman Dyson never even bothered to get his Ph.D.

* * *

23.

While I was a research physicist at the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory in Livermore, California, I met a man who worked on nuclear weapons. He was acutely concerned about radiation hazards, more so than even the scrupulous monitors at the Lab. He thought that cosmic rays contributed an unsuspected health hazard. These high energy protons, constantly sleeting down on us, might make occasional cancerous cells. So he put heavy lead shielding in the attic above his bedroom, reasoning that for eight hours a day he and his wife would be spared this risk. I heard years later that one day the timbers in the ceiling gave way and the massive stuff crushed the bed to splinters. Luckily, nobody was home. This seemed a peculiar way to extend one's life expectancy. I haven't heard whether he has replaced it.

24.

I do both experiments and theory, and each must be "sold" differently to funding agencies. In my lab in the middle 1980s we did a series of experiments in which we propagated a beam of high energy electrons traveling close to the speed of light (that is, relativistic ones) through plasmas. We observed the many ways electromagnetic

emission came out. This applies to a broad range of places, such as pulsars, quasars, and the sporadic emission from Jupiter and the Sun. We also studied how this works when intense beams travel through ordinary air. The Air Force was interested in this — no trouble guessing why — and they asked me to write up our experiments. I gave them a formal, serious summary. Then, for the last page, I ran an extra experiment. We ended the report with a picture of the electron beam, zooming several feet through a darkened lab, crackling with blue energy — and smashing into a model of the starship Enterprise. The beam blew a large, brown hole through the ship and came out the other side. I sent this report in and the Air Force gave me funding which continues to this day. Nobody ever said a word about the photo, though.

25.

One evening at an academic dinner party, I stood on a balcony talking with a leading American poet. We marveled at the pleasant winter weather, cool and dry and clear. The poet studied the brilliant stars, glowing like jewels in oil. He

started pointing to bright ones and asking questions. I described Betelgeuse, a colossal red star which is several times bigger than earth's orbit about our sun. Near it was the nebula of Orion, a gaudy wash of light. Mars and Jupiter burned high up in the blackness. We talked on. Slowly I realized that the poet did not know the difference between a star and a planet. Further, this winner of the National Book Award did not know that the Milky Way is the plane of our galaxy seen edge on. Nor did he even vaguely understand what a galaxy was. Though his poems often treated the beauties of the natural world, he had never felt any need to understand the truths lying behind what struck his eye. As I saw what a vast chasm yawned between us, I felt a strong sense of his fundamental strangeness. What separated us was a gulf greater than the Snow-called "two cultures." This was an attitude which came less from the intellect than from the spirit itself. To me it was a more foreign notion than the mere animism of the past, and underlined how fragile science still is in our world. His instincts seemed to spring from some more modern impulse, yet I could not name it.



"On Death and the Deuce" marks Richard Bowes' third short fiction sale. (His first two will appear sometime next year in Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine.) But this is not his first professional appearance. Rick has written three novels for Warner/Questar: WARCHILD, FERAL CELL and GOBLIN MARKET.

"On Death and the Deuce" has an old-fashioned quality to it, a haunting story with a nasty spin.

On Death and the Deuce

By Rick Bowes

IN THE last days that the Irish ran Hell's Kitchen, I lived in that tenement neighborhood between the West Side docks and Times Square. An old lady of no charm whatsoever named McCready and called Mother rented furnished studios in an underheated fleabag on Tenth Avenue. Payment was cash only by the week or month, with anonymity guaranteed whether desired or not. Looking out the window one February morning, I spotted my Silent Partner heading south toward Forty-second Street.

He was already past me, so it was the clothes that caught my attention first. The camel-hair overcoat had been mine. The dark gray pants were from the last good suit I had owned. That morning I'd awakened from a drinking dream, and was still savoring the warm, safe feeling that comes with realizing it was all a nightmare and that I was sober. The sight of that figure three floors down filled my mouth with the remembered taste of

booze. I tried to spit, but was too dry.

Hustlers called Forty-second the Deuce. My Silent Partner turned at that corner, and I willed him not to notice me. Just before heading east, he looked directly at my window. He wore shades, but his face was the one I feared seeing most. It was mine.

That made me too jumpy to stay in the twelve-by-fifteen-foot room. Reaching behind the bed, I found the place where the wall and floor didn't join. Inside was my worldly fortune: a slim .25 caliber Beretta, and beside it a wad of bills. Extracting six twenties, I put on a thick sweater and leather jacket and went out.

At that hour, nothing much was cooking in Hell's Kitchen. Two junkies went by, bent double by the wind off the Hudson. Up the block a super tossed away the belongings of a drag queen who the week before had gotten cut into bite-size chunks. My Silent Partner was not the kind to go for a casual walk in this weather.

Looking the way he had come, I saw the Club 596 sitting like a bunker at the corner of Forty-third. The iron grating on the front was ajar, but no lights were on inside. As I watched, a guy in a postman's uniform squeezed out the door and hurried away. The Westies, last of the Irish gangs — short, crazed, and violent — sat in the dark dispensing favors, collecting debts. And I knew what my Silent Partner had been up to.

Then I went to breakfast, put the incident to the back of my mind, and prepared for my daily session. The rest of my time was a wasteland, but my late afternoons were taken up with Leo Dunn.

He lived in a big apartment house over in the east sixties. Outside, the building gleamed white. The lobby was polished marble. Upstairs in his apartment, sunlight poured through windows curtained in gold and hit a glass table covered with pieces of silver and crystal. "Kevin, my friend." Mr. Dunn, tall and white-haired, came forward smiling and shook my hand. "How are you? Every time I see you come through this door, it gives me the greatest pleasure."

I sat down on the couch, and he sat across the coffee table from me. The first thing I thought to say was: "I had a drinking dream last night. This crowd watched like it was an Olympic event as I poured myself a shot and drank it. Then I realized what I'd done, and felt like dirt. I woke up, and it was as if a rock had been taken off my head."

Amused, Dunn nodded his understanding. But dreams were of no great

interest to him. So, after pausing to be sure I was through, he drew a breath and was off. "Kevin, you have made the greatest commitment of your life. You stood up and said, 'Guilty as charged. I am a drunk.'"

Mr. Dunn's treatment for alcoholics was a talking cure: he talked, and I listened. He didn't just talk — he harangued; he argued like a lawyer; he gave sermons of fire. Gesturing to a closet door, he told me, "That is the record room where we store the evidence of our mistakes. Any boozehound has tales of people he trusted who screwed him over. But has there ever been anyone you knew that used you as badly and that you went back to as often as you have to booze?"

We had been over this material a hundred times in the past couple of weeks. "You're a bright boy, Kevin, and I wouldn't repeat myself if I hadn't learned that it was necessary. We go back to the record room." Again he pointed to the door. "We look for evidence of our stupidity."

For ten years, my habit and I had traveled from booze through the drug spectrum and back to booze. Then one morning on the apex of a bender, that fine moment when mortality is left behind and the shakes haven't started, I found myself standing at a bar reading a *New York Post* article. It was about some guy called Dunn who treated drunks.

The crash that followed was gruesome. Three days later I woke up empty, sweat-soaked, and terrified in a room I didn't remember renting. At first, it seemed that all I owned were the clothes I had been wearing. Gradually, in jacket and jean pockets, stuck in a boot, I discovered a vaguely familiar pistol, a thick roll of bills, and a page torn from the *Post*. The choice that I saw was clear, either to shoot myself or make a call.

My newly sober brain was blank and soft, and Mr. Dunn remolded it relentlessly. On the afternoon I am describing, he saw my attention wander, clicked a couple of ashtrays together on the table, picked up the gold lighter, and ignited a cigarette with a flourish. "How are you doing, Kevin?"

"O.K.," I told him. "Before I forget," I said, and placed five of the twenties from my stash on the table.

He put them in his pocket without counting and said, "Thank you, Kevin." But when he looked up at me, an old man with pale skin and very blue eyes, he wasn't smiling. "Any news on a job?" He had never questioned me closely, but I knew that my money bothered Mr. Dunn.

Behind him the light faded over Madison Avenue. "Not yet," I said.

"The thing is, I don't need much to get by. Where I'm living is real cheap." At a hundred a week, Leo Dunn was my main expense. He was also what kept me alive. I recognized him as a real lucky kind of habit.

He went back to a familiar theme. "Kevin," he said, looking at the smoke from his cigarette. "For years, your addiction was your Silent Partner. When you decided to stop drinking, that was very bad news for him. Your Silent Partner wants to live as much as you do." At the mention of that name, I remembered what I had seen that morning.

Dunn said, "Your partner had the best racket in the world, skimming off an ever-increasing share of your life, your happiness. He is not just going to give up and go away. He will try treachery, intimidation, flattery, to get you back in harness."

He paused for a moment, and I said, "I saw him today, across the street. He saw me, too. He was wearing clothes that used to belong to me."

"What did he look like, Kevin?" I guess nothing a drunk could say would ever surprise Mr. Dunn.

"Just like me. But at the end of a three-week bender."

"What was he doing when you saw him?" This was asked very softly.

"Coming from a mob bar up the street, the 596 Club. He was trying to borrow money from guys who will whack you just because that's how they feel at the moment."

"Kevin," said Mr. Dunn. "Booze is a vicious, mind-altering substance. It gets us at its mercy by poisoning our minds, making us unable to distinguish between what is real and what isn't. Are you saying that you had to borrow money?" I shook my head. Very carefully, he asked, "Do you mean you remembered some aspect of your drinking self?"

"Something like that," I said. But what I felt was a double loss. Not only had my Silent Partner discovered where I lived, but Dunn didn't believe me. The partner had broken the perfect rapport between us.

At that point the lobby called to announce the next client. As Leo Dunn showed me to the door, his eyes searched mine. He wasn't smiling. "Kevin, you've done more than I would have thought possible when you first walked in here. But there's what they call a dry drunk, someone who's managed to stop drinking, but has not reached the state beyond that. I don't detect involvement in life from you, or real elation. I respect you too much to want to see you as just a dry drunk."

The next client was dressed like a stockbroker. He avoided looking at

me in my street clothes. "Leo," he said, a little too loudly and too sincerely, "I'm glad to see you." And Dunn, having just directed a two-hour lecture at me, smiled and was ready to go again.

Outside, it was already dark. On my way across town, I went through Times Square down to the Deuce. It was rush hour. Spanish hustlers in maroon pants, hands jammed in jacket pockets, black hookers in leather miniskirts, stood on corners, all too stoned to know they were freezing to death. Around them, commuters poured down subway stairs and fled for Queens.

Passing the Victoria Hotel, I glanced in at the desk clerk sitting behind bulletproof glass. I had lived at the Victoria before my final bender. It was where those clothes the Silent Partner wore had been abandoned. Without remembering all the details, I sensed that it wasn't wise to go inside and inquire about my property.

Back on my block, I looked up at my bleak little window, dark and unwelcoming. Mother's was no place to spend an evening. Turning away, I started walking again; probably I ate dinner somewhere, maybe saw a movie. Without booze, I couldn't connect with anyone. Mostly I walked, watched crowds stream out of the theaters. *A Little Night Music* was playing, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Then those rich tourists and nice couples from Westchester hurried into cabs and restaurants and left the streets quite empty.

In Arcade Parade on Broadway, goggle-eyed suit-and-tie johns watched the asses on kids bent over the pinball machines. Down the way a marquee advertised the double bill of *College Bound Babes* and *Bound to Please Girls*. Around a corner a tall guy with a smile like a knife slash chanted, "Got what you need," like a litany.

Glancing up, I realized we were in front of Sanctuary. Built to be a Methodist church, it had gotten famous in the late sixties as a disco. In those days a huge Day-Glo Satan loomed above the former altar; limos idled in front; a team of gorillas worked the door.

Now it was dim and dying, a trap for a particular kind of tourist. Inside, Satan flaked off the wall; figures stood in the shadows, willing to sell what you asked. I could remember in a hazy way spending my last money there to buy the Beretta. My trajectory on that final drunk — the arc that connected the pistol, the money, the absence of my Silent Partner — wasn't buried all that deeply inside me. I just didn't want to look.

At some point that night, the rhythm of the street, the cold logic of the Manhattan grid, took me way west, past the live sex shows and into the heart of the Kitchen. On long, dirty blocks of tenements, I went past small Mick bars with tiny front windows where lines of drinkers sat like marines, and guys in the back booths gossiped idly about last week's whack.

I walked until my hands and feet were numb, and I found myself over on Death Avenue. That's what the Irish of the Kitchen once called Eleventh because of the train tracks that ran there and killed so many of them. Now the trains were gone, the ships whose freight they hauled were gone, and those Irish themselves were fast disappearing. Though not born in the Kitchen, I identified with them a lot.

On Death, in a block of darkened warehouses, sat the Emerald Green Tavern. It was on a Saturday morning at the Emerald Green that I had found myself in a moment of utter clarity with a pistol and a pocketful of money, reading in a newspaper about Leo Dunn. I stood for a while remembering that. Then maybe the cold got to me, and I went home. My memory there is vague.

What I will never forget is the sight of a ship outlined in green and red lights. I was staring at it, and I was intensely cold. Gradually, I realized I was huddled against a pillar of the raised highway near the Hudson piers. One of the last of the cruise ships was docked there, and I thought how good it would be to have the money to sail down to the warm weather.

In fact, it would be so good to have any money at all. My worldly wealth was on me: suede boots and no socks, an overcoat and suit and no underwear. In one pocket were a penny, a dime, and a quarter — my wealth. In another were a set of standard keys and the gravity knife I'd had since college.

Then I knew why I had stolen the keys and where I was going to get money. And I recognized the state I was in: the brief, brilliant period of clarity at the end of a bender. My past was a wreck; my future held a terrifying crash. With nothing behind me and nothing to live for, I knew no fear and was a god.

With all mortal uncertainty and weakness gone, I was pure spirit as I headed down familiar streets. A block east of Death and north of the Deuce, I looked up at a lighted window on the third floor. I crossed the street, my overcoat open, oblivious to the cold.

Security at Mother's was based on there being nothing in the building

worth taking. Drawing out the keys, I turned the street-door lock on my third try and went up the stairs, silently, swiftly. Ancient smells of boiled cabbages and fish, of damp carpet and cigarette smoke and piss, a hundred years of poverty, wafted around me. This was the kind of place a loser lived, a fool came to rest. Contempt filled me.

Light shone under his door. Finding a key the right shape, I transferred it to my left hand, drew out the knife with my right. The key went in without a sound. I held my breath and turned it. The lock clicked; the door swung into the miserable room with a bed, a TV on without the sound, a two-burner stove, a table. An all-too-familiar figure dozed in the only chair, shoes off, pants unbuttoned. Sobriety had made him stupid. Not even the opening of the door roused him. The click of the knife in my hand did that.

The eyes focused, then widened as the dumb face I had seen in ten thousand morning mirrors registered shock. "I got a little debt I want to collect," I said, and moved for him. Rage swept me, a feeling that I'd been robbed of everything: my body, my life. "You took the goddamn money. It's mine. My plan. My guts. You couldn't have pulled that scam in a thousand years."

For an instant the miserable straight head in front of me froze in horror. Then shoulder muscles tensed; stocking feet shot out as he tried to roll to the side and go for the .25. But he was too slow. My knife slashed, and the fool put out his hands. Oh, the terror in those eyes when he saw the blood on his palms and wrists. He fell back, tipping over the chair. The blade went for the stomach, cut through cloth and into flesh.

Eyes wide, his head hit the wall. The knife in my hand slashed his throat. The light in the eyes went out. The last thing I saw in them was a reflection of his humiliation at dying like that, pants fallen down, jockey shorts filling with dark red blood. His breath suddenly choked, became a drowning sound. An outstretched hand pointed to the loose board and the money.

I WAS JUST cut down," I told Dunn the next morning. "It wasn't even a fight. I left that knife behind when I had to move, and the fucking Silent Partner had it and just cut me down." It was hard to get my throat to work.

"It was a dream, Kevin, a drinking dream like the one you told me

yesterday. It has no power over your conscious mind. You came home and fell asleep sitting up. Then you had a nightmare. You say you fell off your chair and woke up on the floor. It was just a dream."

My eyes burned. "The expression my Silent Partner had on his face is the one I used to see sometimes in the mirror. Those moments when I was so far gone I could do anything."

"Nothing else has reached you like this, Kevin."

"Sorry. I couldn't sleep."

"Don't be sorry. This is part of the process. I don't know why, but this has to happen for the treatment to work. I've had detective sergeants bawl like babies, marines laugh until they cried. Until this, you haven't let anything faze you. Our stupid drinker's pride can take many forms."

"I won't be able to sleep as long as he's out there."

"Understand, Kevin, that I'm not a psychiatrist. I was educated by the Jesuits a long time ago. Dreams or how you feel about your mother don't mean much to me. But I hear myself say that, and spot my own stupid pride at work. If dreams are what you bring me, I'll use them." He paused, and I blew my nose. "What does your Silent Partner want, Kevin? You saw through his eyes in your dream."

"He wants to disembowel me!"

"The knife was the means, Kevin. Not the motive. What was he looking for?"

"My money. He knew where I had it."

"You keep money in your room? You don't have a job. But you pay me regularly in fairly crisp twenties and hundreds. It's stolen money, isn't it, Kevin?"

"I guess so. I don't remember."

"Earlier you mentioned that in the dream, you went for a gun. Is there blood on the money, Kevin? Did you hurt anyone? Do you know?"

"The gun hasn't been fired."

"I assume it's not registered, probably stolen. Get rid of it. Can you return the money?"

"I don't even know who it belonged to."

"You told me that he was in a calm eye when he came after you. That was his opportunity. You had that same kind of clarity when you found the article about me. You had the money with you then?"

"The gun, too."

"Kevin, let's say that some people's Silent Partners are more real than others. Then let's say that in a moment of clarity, you managed to give yours the slip and walked off with the money the two of you had stolen. Without him holding you back, you succeeded in reaching out for help. The money is the link. It's what still connects you to your drinking past. I don't want any of that money, and neither do you. Get rid of it."

"You mean throw it away?"

"The other day, you said your Silent Partner was borrowing from the West Side mob. If he's real enough to need money that badly, let him have it. No one, myself above all, ever loses his Silent Partner entirely. But this should give you both some peace."

"What'll I do for money? I won't be able to pay you."

"Do you think after all this time, I don't know which ones aren't going to pay me?" I watched his hands rearrange the crystal ashtrays, the gold lighter, as he said, "Let's look in the record room, where we will find that booze is a vicious, mind-altering substance, and that we have to be aware at every moment of its schemes." I raised my eyes. Framed in the light from the windows, Dunn smiled at me and said, "Keep just enough to live on for a couple of weeks until you find work. Which you will."

Afterward in my room, I took out the pistol and the money, put two hundred back in the wall, and placed the rest in a jacket pocket. The Beretta I carefully stuck under my belt at the small of my back. Then I went out.

At first, I walked aimlessly around the Kitchen. My Silent Partner had threatened me. It seemed my choices were to give up the money or to keep the money and give up Leo Dunn. The first I thought of as surrender; the second meant I'd be back on the booze. Then a third choice took shape. Payback. I would do to him just what he had tried to do to me.

Searching for him, I followed what I remembered of our route on the last night of our partnership. It had begun at Sanctuary. Passing by, I saw that the disco was no longer dying. It was dead. The doors were padlocked. On the former church steps, a black guy slept with his head on his knees. No sign of my Silent Partner.

But I finally recalled what had happened there. Sanctuary was a hunting ground. Tourists were the game. That last night I had run into four fraternity assholes in town with seven grand for a midwinter drug

buy. Almost dead broke, I talked big about my connections. Before we left together, I bought the Beretta.

Following the trail, I walked by the Victoria. That's where I had taken them first. "Five guys showing up will not be cool," I said, and persuaded two of them to wait in my dismal room. "As collateral, you hold everything I own." That amounted to little more than some clothes and a few keepsakes like the knife. With the other two, I left the hotel that last time knowing I wouldn't be back. I recognized my Silent Partner's touch. He had been with me at that point.

Turning into an icy wind off the river, I took the same route that the frat boys and I had taken a few weeks before. At a doorway on a deserted side street near Ninth Avenue, we halted. I remembered telling them that this was the place. In the tenement hall, I put the pistol at the base of one kid's head and made him beg the other one to give me the money.

Standing in the doorway again, I recalled how the nervous sweat on my hand had made it hard to hold on to the .25. When those terrified kids had handed over the money, I discouraged pursuit by making them throw their shoes into the dark and lie face down with their hands behind their heads. The one I'd put the pistol on had pissed his pants. He wept and begged me not to shoot. Remembering that made my stomach turn. Right then my Partner had still been calling the shots.

The rest of that night was gone beyond recovery. But what had happened in those blank black hours wasn't important. I knew where the search for my partner was going to end. Death Avenue north of the Deuce had always been a favorite spot for both of us. The deserted warehouses, the empty railroad yards, made it feel like the end of the world.

Approaching the Emerald Green Tavern, I spotted a lone figure leaning on a lamppost, watching trailer trucks roll south. Only a lack of funds would have kept a man out on the street on a night like that. Touching the pistol for luck, stepping up behind my Silent Partner, I asked, "Whatcha doing?"

Not particularly surprised, not even turning all the way around, he replied, "Oh, living the life." I would never have his nonchalance. His face was hidden by shadows and dark glasses. That was just as well.

The air around him smelled of cheap booze. "We have to talk." I gestured toward the Emerald Green.

As we crossed the street, he told me, "I knew you'd show up. This is

where we parted company. When I woke up days later, all I had were these clothes and a couple of keepsakes." I was reminded of the knife. My Silent Partner knew as soon as that crossed my mind. "Don't worry," he said. "I sold it." He went through the door first.

The Emerald Green was a typical Hell's Kitchen joint, with a bar that ran front to back, a few booths, and beer- and cigarette-soaked air unchanged since the Truman administration. The facilities were the one distinguishing feature of the place. The rest rooms lay down a flight of stairs and across a cellar/storage area. You could organize a firing squad down there, and the people above wouldn't know.

Or care. The customers that night were several guys with boozers' noses, an old woman with very red hair who said loudly at regular intervals, "Danny? Screw Danny," and a couple of Spanish guys off some night shift and now immobile at a table. The dead-eyed donkey of a bartender looked right through me and nodded at my Silent Partner. In here, he was the real one. We went to the far end of the bar near the cellar door, where we could talk. I ordered a ginger ale. My companion said, "Double Irish."

As we sat, he gave a dry chuckle. "Double Irish is about right for us." At no time did I turn and stare my Silent Partner in the face. But the filmed mirror behind the bar showed that he wore the rumpled jacket over a dirty T-shirt. The camel-hair coat was deeply stained. When the whiskey came, he put it away with a single gesture from counter to mouth. Up and in. I could taste it going down.

It was like living in a drinking dream. I touched the back of my belt and said, "You found out where I live."

"Yeah, Billy at the 596 told me you were staying at Mother's. Of course, what he said was that he had seen me going in and out. So I knew." Indoors, my partner smelled ripe. The back of his hand was dirty.

"You owe them money?" The last thing I needed was to get shot for debts he had run up.

"Not even five. My credit's no good," he said. "You left me with nothing. They locked me out of the hotel. Ripping off those kids was something you never could have done by yourself. You needed me." He signaled for a refill. The bartender's eyes shifted my way, since I was paying.

I shook my head, not sure I could have him drink again and not do it

myself. "I've got the money on me. It's yours. So that we don't attract attention, what I want you to do is get up and go downstairs. After a couple of minutes, I'll join you."

"Pass the money to me under the bar." He didn't trust me.

"There's something else I want you to have." For a long moment he sat absolutely still. The TV was on with the sound off. It seemed to be all beer ads. "When you come back up here," I told him, "you will be able to afford enough doubles to kill yourself." That promise made him rise and push his way through the cellar door.

For a good two minutes, I sipped ginger ale and breathed deeply to calm myself. Then I followed him. Downstairs, there were puddles on the floor. The rest-room doors were open. Both were empty. One of the johns was broken and kept flushing. It sounded like an asthmatic trying to breathe.

The cellar was lighted by an overhead bulb above the stairs and one at the far end of the cellar near the rest rooms. Both lights swayed slightly, making it hard to focus. My Silent Partner had reached up and bumped them for just that reason. It was the kind of thing that I would not have thought of. He stood where the light didn't quite hit him.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I reached back and drew out the .25. He seemed to flicker before me. "Easy does it," he said. "You know how jumpy you are with guns." His tone was taunting, not intimidated.

I realized I could read him as easily as he could me. My Silent Partner wanted me to try to shoot him and find out that I couldn't. Then, after I failed, we could both go upstairs, have some drinks, and resume our partnership. Carefully, I ejected the clip and stuck it in my pocket. His eyes followed me as I put the empty pistol on the stairs. "You bought this; you get rid of it," I said. "My guess is, it's got a bad history."

"You'll never have another friend like me." His voice, my voice, had a whine to it, and I knew this was getting to him. I reached into my pocket and took out the money and a piece of torn newspaper. "You thought about what it's going to be like to be broke?" he asked. "It's not like you've got any skills."

I had thought of it, and it scared me. I hesitated. Then I noticed that the newspaper was the page with the Dunn article. Taking a deep breath, I riffled the money and told my Silent Partner. "Almost six grand. Just about everything I have." I put the cash on the stairs beside the Beretta and turned to go. "So long. It's been real."

"Oh, I'll keep in touch," he said in a whisper. Looking back, I saw nothing but a blur of light in the shadows.

On the stairs, I felt light-footed, like a burden had been laid down. This was relief, maybe even the happiness Mr. Dunn had mentioned. From his perch near the front, the bartender gave me a slightly wary look, like maybe I had come in at 2:00 A.M., drunk ginger ale, and had a conversation with myself. It occurred to me that if that's what happened, the first one to go take a leak was going to get a very nice surprise.

But as I went out into the cold, the bartender's gaze shifted, his hand reached for the pouring bottle, and I heard the cellar door swing open behind me.



"So 9X7 isn't 72. I see the big picture. Details just get in the way."

Algis Budrys has written a number of science fiction classics, including the novels ROGUE MOON, WHO? and MICHAELMAS. His short stories, which appeared all over the magazines in the sixties, have been too rare recently. Over the past ten years, he has devoted his career to developing new writers at Clarion and through Writers of the Future. He has found a number of the writers that now regularly grace these pages.

In the last few months, Algis has returned to writing. He has finished a short novel, HARD LANDING, (which will appear in the October/November issue of F&SF), and has written several new short stories. "Grabow and Collicker and I" was originally written for the anthology CONFEDERACY OF THE DEAD which NAL will publish this fall.

Grabow and Collicker and I

By Algis Budrys

I DREAM, Johnnie . . . I dream all the time," Cash said, a haunted look in his remaining eye. "I dream of home, I dream of Clara, I dream of the baby. All the time." He laughed, partway . . . a hollow sound, with the loneliness baying in it. "It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't dream."

"I don't dream," I replied.

We were in the trenches at Cold Harbor, piled up, waiting for our next use. Two hundred men, or what was left of manhood, of Pedrick's Special Corps, Attached USA. No one had ever seen Pedrick; I doubted if he still existed. Dr. Karl Grabow existed, bending over us in the night, seeing which ones still retained essential function, sending the ones who were too shot up to a place no one dared to think of. Grabow was an old man; older than us, anyway, in an old claw-hammer coat and a shirt that was white under the soil and things that clung to it, and carrying what seemed

like an endless supply of fluid in big, clumsy hypodermics.

Grabow had a counterpart who introduced new bodies into our group, to replace the ones Grabow sent away. Harlow Collicker was amazingly pale, amazingly young, amazing in that he had a peg leg and a claw for a hand, but was otherwise dressed identically with Grabow, though his shirt was a little cleaner, lurching and fuming over the ground, leading his daily troop of replacements, who lurched and did not fume after him, because they were past fuming. Nobody ever saw Grabow and Collicker together; Grabow came at night, Collicker at dawn. No one came in full daylight. There was no need, and there was copious revulsion.

"Aw gee," Cash said, "I wish this were over. I wish I could lie down somewhere and forget about Clara."

"Well, step in front of a shell."

Cash gestured awkwardly. "You know I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't let you fellows down like that."

Well, that may have been a load of manure. The fact was, it was almost as hard to get yourself hurt, if you were trying, as it was to not get hurt if you weren't. And considering that it took a lot more to stop us . . . I mean, Cash had taken one in the face yesterday, and he was never going to do more than turn your stomach ever since, but basically he was still functional. What startled me, some, was that he was still talking, considering that part of his brain was gone, but perhaps it wasn't an important part. Or perhaps something had removed the part of mine that formed these judgments, but in running my hands over my head as soon as I thought of this, I found an unbroken surface. No, I decided, Cash meant it, more or less.

But it was no good, dreaming of the Claras, or the babies . . . no good at all anymore, and I wished Cash didn't do it, though in fact it did no harm; it just was excess baggage, and Cash should get rid of it.

My own dreams, now — I had lied to Cash — my own dreams were martial, and mostly glorious.

God! Banners and bugles, cavalry charges and musket smoke, the peculiar roar of Gatling guns . . . ah well! Oddly enough, the dreams of a young recruit signing up, on a frosty Connecticut morning, to carry a musket that weighed startlingly, and wear a blue cap that sat oddly on one's head . . . the dreams of a young recruit, as I said, sometimes did play

out, in rough semblance, at least; at least, when translated down from an Olympian view of the battlefield to the reality of one man, dashing in terror through the bushes, but dashing forward, eyes focused down to the point where everything beyond a narrow tube of vision was just a blur, just a blue blur or a gray. But more often, truth to tell, it was secesh bayonets at dawn, and minie balls for luncheon and supper. God!

And the war went on. Men came and went. Came and went. But I, although Johnny had pinked me now and then, nevertheless stayed, and officers came to depend on me. And gradually I came to an understanding that all that was involved was continuing to go forward; that all the rest was illusion and fustian, signifying only the unbelievable good spirits of new recruits and the folderol of officers. I came to realize, as my well-learned lesson from the war, that I would live or I would die, and that I would continue to go forward until I died, or the war ended, and all else was illusion and fustian.

And so, when one day they asked for volunteers . . . unmarried men only, with no living relatives . . . I wondered what that might be. And found myself, much to my bemusement, standing in the short line outside Grabow's tent.

Grabow was younger then, last year, and much cleaner. Much cleaner, though not necessarily more sensible. He saw us one at a time, and in time my turn came, and I stood before him inside the tent, with him seated at a deal table on a folding chair, and an endless supply of hypodermics on another table behind him. A fresh supply of hypodermics bubbled and boiled in a kettle to one side. "I want to try an experiment," he said, staring at me walleyed. "An experiment."

I shifted my feet in the mud. "What are you talking about?"

"Assume you died," he said.

Well, that was not much of an assumption. You do not believe you'll die, of course, but what if your mind simply figures the odds, knows that it is the more daring assumption that you'll live? War . . . war is stupid, and often utterly without point, and young men die so that old men can make what point there is. But we go to war so often. So often. And we die.

I looked at Grabow from under the bill of my cap, and said: "And . . .?"

Grabow waved at the rows of hypodermics. "I offer you a second chance."

Well, the short of it is, you cannot see how it could do any harm. So

you — if you're me — come out of the tent rubbing your arm, and not much changed, really. It's a different matter when Cash comes out of the tent rubbing his arm, and you round on him and you demand: "What have you done? What have you done, Merton Cash! You have a wife . . . a baby!"

"Well," he shuffled and stammered, "I — Ah, I couldn't have you think that I — I couldn't let you have me a coward."

"Coward! You blamed fool, all you've done is ensure that if you die, Clara won't even have the comfort of your bones! You'll be shot and shelled until your own mother wouldn't recognize you, and you think Grabow could ship you back, if he were so minded, which he's obviously not?"

"Ah. . . ."

A H. AH. My dreams became more vivid with Dr. Grabow's fluid boiling in my veins, ready to take over if the blood should run out. Dreams. . . .

I was in a tent with Grant, and Grant had his jaw clamped around a cigar, which I recall was half-smoked and badly bitten, and he was saying to a man whose features I could not make out, "I can succeed without them!"

"Well, I have no doubt. No doubt at all," the featureless man said. "I merely point to this as a method for keeping the casualty figures down."

Grant shuddered. Grant! Shuddered. He turned to me. "What do you think?"

And I dreamed ahead . . . at men struggling through luxuriant and fecund growth, in someplace called the Philippines, while silent death found them at every turn; at men in long lines of trenches for years at a time, while strange machines smashed at them on the ground and from the air; at men engaged in over half the world, and machines ever more curious, until finally they . . . God no, whole cities at a blow! And the people melting. . . .

"It is the only means," I seemed to say. "The only means to keep war from spreading to the civilians."

And Grant stared into the future with me.

The featureless man turned into the lamplight, and I saw that it was Mr. Lincoln, with a terrible visage and a terrible nod. "So be it," he said, and buried his face in his hands, which let me see the wound behind his ear.

* * *

It was in the early days of '64 that a Johnny bayoneted me through the heart. I recall a surgeon bending over me, and then the look on his face, and the outraged way in which he said: "Get it off my table! It's another one of Grabow's litches!" And I knew then that it was all over for me; that I had crossed over a divide over which there was no going back. No going back ever.

And Collicker came for me, amazingly gentle, and led me away from the places of men, and put me with the others of my kind, to await the need for a particular assignment or another that the living would do only with great reluctance. I remember that although there was no ostensible reason for it, I avoided looking into the faces of the men around me as Collicker led me away and they drew back as though from something unclean. Something unclean. Yes. Well. I did not look much into the faces of those of my own new kind, either; for one thing, they were, many of them, not whole, but I think largely it was something else . . . of what use was it, really, to look at each other?

And in the course of time, here came Merton Cash, whom I did look at because he came with a crooked grin and puppy-dog enthusiasm, and only a little missing at the time — they had shot him in the stomach — and he greeted me like a fond relation. I would have wept.

"Ah, ah," he flurried, "it's so good to see you again!" And even Collicker took note, staring incredulously, then limping away a little more hastily than usual. "You know, it's not so bad," Cash said. "I knew it was over when the pain in my belly went away at last. There's advantages."

But now was later, and Cash dreamed of Clara and the baby, whom he would never, never see again, and I dreamed my dreams.

I dreamed my dreams. And the summons came, and we went up against the redoubt at Cold Harbor. And it was terrible.

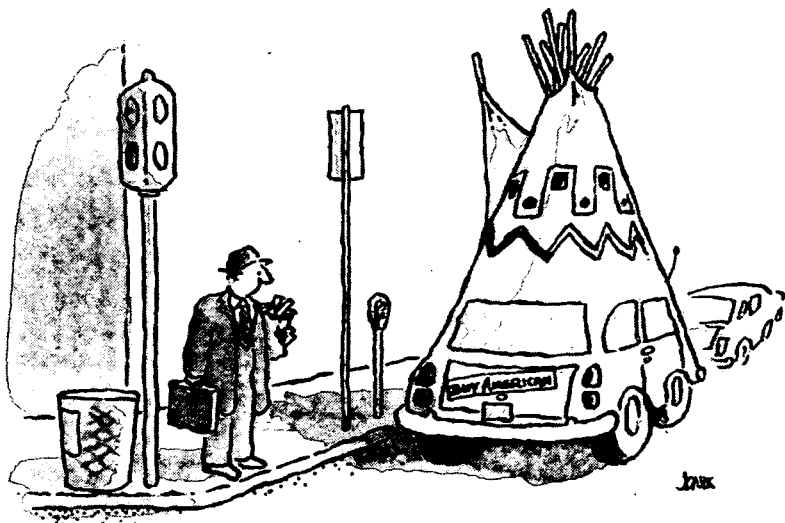
I lay in a windrow of the dead, all feeling gone from hips down, trying to turn my body so I could keep firing, but a dead Irishman lay across my chest, and if I had had need to breathe, I don't think I would have lasted until Grabow came for me, just at dusk. And he looked at me, and pulled the Irishman off me, and, without saying a word, pulled me off the dead Irishman, so that I understood, at last, that I was all gone below the hips; below the hips, I had been struck by the same cannonball that had struck the Irishman, and below the hips, I was all gone.

And Grabow loaded me onto a cart, with others, and took me away.

And in due course, when my turn came, he fretted and picked through his stock of parts, and he sewed on a pair of legs only slightly mismatched, and in the morning, Collicker came and took me back to the waiting survivors of Pedrick's Special Corps, Attached USA, along with many other men who were patchwork, and still we did not come up to two hundred, so brutal had Cold Harbor been.

Cash was there. He had been shot through the throat, so he could not tell me what he dreamed of; his face, what was left of it, looked haunted so sore it made my heart ache so that it would have burst, had it not been burst already.

And I thought of the bodies that had used these legs before me, and the bodies gone to wherever Grabow took the remains that were minced too fine to be useful any longer, and I understood that every fragment yet lived, in a sense, and dreamed, though I suppose some pieces dreamed more in the mumbling sense than in real dreams, and oh God, how did Grabow bury them?



F. Paul Wilson is best known for his horror novels, including *THE KEEP*, *THE TOMB* and *BLACK WIND*. But he has written some very creepy short stories. (See "Soft" in *SOFT AND OTHER STORIES* from TOR, and "Cuts" in *Author's Choice Monthly #13* from Pulphouse.) He also writes wonderful science fiction.

The background for "Bugs" comes from Paul's novel, *NIGHTWORLD*, (to be published by Jove later this year). "Bugs" combines Paul's talent for science fiction with his horrific world view, producing a classic, spooky vision reminiscent of a 1950's B movie.

Bugs

By F. Paul Wilson

THE SKIES darken; the abyss opens its gaping mouths in the land; Nature goes wild — what more proof do you need that the end is at hand?"

Hank glanced at the TV screen in the next room. Another preacher. The cable was lousy with them. All with the same message: The End Is Here. What insight. Like you needed someone on TV to tell you that. All you had to do was look out the window.

Hank turned back to this particular window, but didn't look out as he hammered in the final nail. He'd started an hour ago, used bolt cutters to snip all the pieces of cyclone fencing to size in one sitting, and now he was done. The final piece was securely fixed to the frame of the bathroom window. He stepped back and surveyed the job.

"There!" he said aloud. His voice echoed off the tiles. "That oughta

keep the bastards out."

Even if the bugs tore out his screens and smashed the window panes, nothing bigger than two inches across was getting through that fencing—and they were *all* bigger than two inches across.

But just as important as the fencing on the windows was the bar on the door. Hank had to wind his way through stacks of canned-goods cartons and five-gallon jugs of springwater in the living room to admire his handiwork there. He'd bolted the brackets deep into the doorframe; they were heavy-duty steel, designed to hold a four-by-four oak bar.

Bugs and people — neither was getting in unless Hank said so.

He had to admit, though, the apartment looked like hell. Carol would probably pitch a fit if she saw it.

But Carol wouldn't be seeing it. Carol was gone and not coming back. Or so she'd said.

Hank stepped to the window and peered out through the mesh. This is what it must feel like to be in prison — except that no prison looked out on Manhattan's Upper East Side. And the nearest prison was empty. He'd heard on the news this morning that there'd been a massive jailbreak at Riker's Island when the night-shift guards had failed to show up for work.

Everything was falling apart. Panic and anarchy in the streets. All because of the bugs. Humanity was allowed the daylight hours, but the bugs ruled the night. And winter was coming. The days were getting shorter and the nights longer.

He watched the last rays of the sun fade behind the neighboring buildings. Night again. Soon the air would be filled with those flying monstrosities. He wondered where Carol was. Despite the arguments and her damned shortsightedness, he couldn't help worrying, hoping she was safe.

The phone rang then. Hank ran to answer it.

"Carol?" he said as he jammed the receiver to his ear. Relief flooded him at the sound of her familiar voice. "Where are you?"

"I'm at my folks'. I'm O.K."

"I see," he said. Now that he knew she was safe, annoyance seeped though. "You planning on staying there?"

"I don't know. I needed to talk to somebody, Hank, and I can't seem to talk to you since the bugs came."

"Talk?" His heart kicked up its rate. "What have you been talking about?"

"Us. I wanted to straighten a few things out in my head."

"Did you tell them about the — about our supplies?"

"Yes. But I just —"

"Carol! How could you?" He felt as if he'd been stabbed. "Didn't I tell you not to mention them to anybody? Those are for us!"

"You mean you wouldn't share a little food with my folks if they were hungry?"

"The stores are all sold out as of this morning, Carol. The shelves are bare! When we use up what we have, there'll be no more. I've stocked this stuff in for us! *Us!* So we can survive until this . . . this apocalypse is over!"

"This is why I left, Hank," she said. "You've gone crazy."

"Fine!" he said, feeling a cold wind stirring up and blowing through his heart. "Stay the night with your mommy and daddy. Talk your little heart out. Good night!"

He slammed the receiver down, waited a couple of seconds, then lifted it again and left it off the cradle. Then he stepped to the door and dropped the big four-by-four bar onto its brackets.

The receiver began to howl. He jammed a cushion over it.

Carol . . . how could she do this to him? Why was she blabbing about their supplies all over town? Why was she trying to undermine his plans? It didn't make sense. He'd put all this together for the two of them. He was her husband. It was his duty to look out for her. And that was just what he'd been doing.

But apparently Carol didn't care. No, it was worse than not caring — she was actively sabotaging him. Her mother would tell Carol's sister, and she'd tell her husband, who'd tell his whole goddamn family, and so on. A geometric progression. And when they ran out of food because they hadn't had the foresight to stock up, they'd come knocking on his door, whining and pleading for a bite. And when he said no, they'd make a ruckus and attract a bigger crowd, and then things could get ugly. Hank envisioned a battering ram in the hall, breaking down his door, the hungry horde rushing in, clawing at each other to get to *his* food, *his* water, leaving him with nothing, not even his life if he tried to stop them.

Hank shuddered. Carol's big mouth was going to ruin all his plans. And there was no way he could stop her.

Or was there?

He couldn't make her go around and tell everyone that she'd been lying. Even if he could, it wouldn't work. But he could *make* her story a lie.

All he'd have to do would be to move the supplies.

And he knew just where to take them: the Jersey Shore. He remembered a long span of his bachelor years when he used to rent a summer bungalow at places like Chadwick Beach or Seaside Heights. Most of them were little more than plywood boxes, but he knew a couple of places that were fairly sturdy, equipped with storm shutters and heat. They'd be empty now, the beaches and boardwalks all but deserted, waiting for next summer's renters — renters who wouldn't be coming. A perfect locale.

He got to work arranging all the cases of food in four-foot stacks by the door — the maximum load he could handle with his hand truck. At first light tomorrow, he'd cover each stack with a sheet and hustle it down to his rented van still parked below.

Hank took a blanket and huddled down behind his walls of food and began counting the hours till dawn. He drifted into an exhausted sleep and dreamed of a quieter time when he and Carol had been happy together and the nights weren't filled with bloody horror and violent death. A time before the bugs. . . .

The bugs. Nobody knew where they had come from. It had all begun like a surrealist's nightmare. Giant holes opening in the earth one night, bottomless holes, truly bottomless — scientists all over the globe trying to sound those holes and failing. Where did the hole go? No one knew. All that the scientists could say was that the holes went . . . elsewhere. And on the second night, the downdraft flowing into those holes reversed to an updraft, carrying a carrion stench. And the bugs.

The bugs. Not swatable things. Big, vicious mothers, a foot or more in length, and nothing like anyone had ever seen. The newsfolk had dreamed up names for them, and each night a new one was added to the list.

First came the chew wasps — darting, lobster-sized horrors with dragonfly wings, all jaws and diamond-hard dagger teeth. They attacked en masse like a school of piranha and left nothing but a red stain in their wake, not even bones.

Next came the belly flies with their softball-sized acid sacs that digested you alive.

Then came the spearheads, the most apt name: they drove their conical,

razor-sharp heads into your skull or abdomen and sucked you dry.

Every night the bugs swarmed from the holes and lay claim to the dark hours, attacking anything that moved. At dawn they returned to the shadows of the holes, waiting hungrily for the next sunset, and for the next new species to join their relentless assault.

What new horror would the holes yield tonight? Even Hank's worst nightmares held no clue.

Whatever, tonight was going to be a bad one. The worst yet.

Suddenly he was awake. A sound from the bedroom. Breaking glass. Bugs — spearheads, most likely — were ramming themselves against the windows, smashing the panes. They'd be swarming in and eating him alive now if not for the cyclone fencing. He listened for a while as they battered futilely against the metal links, then fluttered off, heading for other redder pastures.

At various times during the night, he heard screams from next door, thudding footsteps in the hallway. At one point a woman pounded on his door, crying about bugs in the hallway, begging for *somebody* to let her in. Hank's first impulse was to open up — he actually reached for the bar — but then he wondered if it might be a trap, someone who'd spotted him bringing in his supplies, and trying to trick her way in. So he crouched there with his hands pressed over his ears and his teeth clamped down on his lips, waiting for her to go away. A sudden, agonized scream broke through the seal of his palms, and he snatched them away to listen. No further screams, but muffled, gurgling sobs that were hideous to hear, then violent thrashing just beyond the door, then silence.

Thoroughly shaken, Hank was about to turn and crawl back to his blanket, when he saw the blood leaking under the door and pooling on the floor by the threshold. He gagged and ran for the bathroom.

Later on, when he could stomach it, he made coffee. With the sound down so low he could barely hear it, he watched the tube. The picture flickered now and again, but he never totally lost power. He had a battery-powered portable ready if needed. About the only things on were preachers and news — disastrous news.

The president had proclaimed a state of national emergency, but the armed forces were in complete disarray. The whole social fabric was unraveling. The news footage only steeled Hank's resolve to get out of the city as soon as the sun rose. In fact, why wait till dawn? The sky was

getting lighter now. Those things should be on their way back to the hole already if they wanted to make it before sunrise. Maybe he could get a head start on loading the van.

The first stack was already draped and loaded on the hand truck. Hank lifted the bar and opened the door for a quick peek.

Someone was out there. Down the hall to his left, a still form lay curled on its side near the elevators. No one else was in sight. Hank stepped outside his door, locked it behind him, then hurried down the hall, pushing the loaded hand truck ahead of him, following the long trail of smeared blood that ran from his doorway to the still form.

It was a woman. Or had been. Hank forced himself to look. He didn't recognize what was left of her. Her body was shrunken, wizened; all of her exposed skin was shredded, chewed up but strangely bloodless. He bit back a surge of bile and told himself that it was a good thing he hadn't opened his door last night; if he had, he might be as dead as she. He repeated that a couple of times as he turned his back to her and waited for the elevator to arrive.

Hank whirled as an angry buzz came from far down the hall to his left. A couple of the ceiling fixtures were smashed down at the end, so it was dark there. He couldn't see anything, but he knew that buzz. Wings. Big, double dragonfly wings. He'd heard plenty of it these past nights. And then he heard another sound — the gnashing teeth of a chew wasp.

Terror rammed a fist down hard on his bladder. Too early! He'd left the apartment *too damn early!*

His first impulse was to run for his apartment, but a vision of himself standing before the locked door, fumbling for his keys while the chew wasp zeroed in on his neck, kept him where he was, pounding on the DOWN button, the UP button, *anything* that would get the elevator here.

The buzz became louder, angrier, closer. And then he saw it as it came into the light, hurtling down the hall at a level of about five feet, directly at him. The grinding of the teeth picked up tempo. Frozen with terror, a scream building in his throat, Hank watched it come for him.

And then another sound — the opening of the elevator doors. Hank ducked inside, yanking the hand truck after him as he hit the DOOR CLOSE button. The chew wasp veered toward him, but couldn't make the turn. It slammed into the edge of the open door and fell to the floor with a bent and twisted wing. It flopped and thrashed and buzzed furiously on the

hallway carpet while Hank frantically pressed the LOBBY button. As the doors began to close, the chew wasp straightened its wing and launched itself at the elevator. Hank ducked, but the doors slid closed before the thing reached him.

Pressing both hands over his quaking, churning stomach, Hank leaned against the back wall of the sinking elevator in a sweaty, gasping squat. He didn't want to move. He wanted to stay in this windowless steel box and wait for day. But he pushed himself to his feet. The elevator was on its way down, and he had to get out of the city. He had to get these supplies transferred to the van before everybody who survived the night was out and about.

The elevator light dimmed, and the car lurched, paused. Oh Lord! Was he going to be stuck here?

Then it started down again.

No question about it: he had to get out now. Who knew how long the power would last?

When the doors slid open on the lobby, Hank peered out. Dim out there. All the lights either out or broken. More than lights were broken. Off to his right, in the faint predawn light, he saw that the thick glass of the front door and windows was smashed, blue-green shards scattered all over the tiled lobby floor. And something else by the remains of the door.

Hank squinted into the faint but growing light. Another body. He listened for the sound of wings. Quiet. Taking a deep breath, he tilted the hand truck and rolled it ahead of him as he hurried toward the door. He slowed by the corpse. This one was male, hardly chewed up at all, but very pale, very dead. He didn't recognize him either. Hank realized how few of his fellow tenants he knew. Maybe that was for the best. He looked down at this fellow's wide, glazed eyes and shuddered.

How did you die, mister!

As he turned away, he heard a sound, something between a cluck and a gurgle. It seemed to come from the corpse. As he stared, he saw the throat work, the jaw move. But he couldn't be alive — not with those dead eyes!

And then the man's mouth opened, and Hank saw something moving inside. No, not inside anymore, slithering out. A flat, wide, pinched head, dark glistening brown where it wasn't bloody red, followed by a sinuous six-foot body as big around as a beer can, powered by countless fine, rubbery legs, all dripping red.

Some sort of giant millipede, squeezing out the corpse's gullet and coming right for him. And it was *fast*!

Hank yelped and backpedaled across the lobby. He kept going until the backs of his legs hit the edge of the settee against the wall, then he hopped up on it and tried to climb the wall.

But the thing wasn't interested in him. It veered toward the doorway and raced over the shattered glass, heading for the street. Heading for the nearest hole, no doubt.

He'd never seen anything like that before. It had to be the latest addition to the bug horde.

Realizing that he looked like an old maid who'd seen a mouse, Hank jumped down from the settee, ran to the doorway, and looked out.

Monday morning. The streets should have been jumping by now, clogged with cabs and cars and delivery trucks. But nothing was moving. No, wait. Up the street he spotted a garbage-can-sized beetle with a wicked set of mandibles spread wide before it, scuttling by at the corner, heading toward Central Park; an occasional flying thing whizzed through the air, also heading west. Except for those, the street was empty. Where had the giant millipede gone? How could it have got around the corner so fast?

Didn't matter. He had to get moving. He ran back into the lobby, his feet slipping and crunching on the glass, and pulled his hand truck out to the van. He quickly dumped all the cases into the back, then hurried back to the elevator. Had to keep moving. He was going to have to make a lot of trips before he got everything transferred.

CLEAR SAILING on the New Jersey Turnpike. Hardly any other cars. Hank had most of the six southbound lanes to himself.

He wondered why more people weren't on the move, then realized that gas was probably in short supply — all the service areas he'd passed so far had been deserted. And where was there to go? According to the news reports, hell was everywhere. It might be a horror show where you were, but you could be fleeing into something far worse. And what if dark fell before you made it to where you were going? Better to stay where you were, hunker down, and try to hold on to what you had.

As he drove, he couldn't help thinking about Carol. Strange it had taken a crisis of these apocalyptic proportions to make him realize how little they had in common, how shallow their relationship had been. He should have

seen it long ago, especially when they'd gone head-to-head on the subject of having kids. He'd wanted lots; Carol hadn't wanted any. *I don't want to bring a child into this kind of world.* And of course Carol got her way.

Hank had to smile. The world she hadn't wanted to bring a child into had been a paradise compared to this new one.

Right again, Carol. And you love to be right.

He wasn't deserting her, though. He was nothing if not loyal. He'd come back for her when he'd found a place for them down the Shore. But he'd make sure she didn't know where they were going until they got there. That way she couldn't yap about it to anyone.

He saw the sign for Exit 11 — Garden State Parkway. That was his. The parkway would take him down the coast to Seaside Heights. Just past that sign was another for the Thomas A. Edison Service Area. Under that, sitting on the curb, was a sheet of plywood, hand-painted:

WE HAVE GAS DEISEL TOO

Yeah, but can you spell?

Hank checked his gas gauge: half a tank. They were probably charging an arm and a leg per gallon, but who knew when he'd get another chance to buy gas — if ever?

Ahead he saw a beat-up station wagon turn off the road onto the service-area approach. Hank decided to follow.

As he approached the gas lanes, he saw one of the two overalled attendants leaning in the passenger window of the station wagon. The attendant straightened up and waved the wagon on.

Probably doesn't have enough money, Hank thought.

He smiled and clinked his heel against the canvas bags stowed under the front seat. He had something better than money. Silver coins. Precious metal. Always worth something no matter what the times, but worth more in bad times. And the worse things got, the more they were worth.

He slowed, reached down, and pulled out a handful of coins, he shoved them into his pocket, checked that both door locks were down, then headed for the gas lanes.

The two attendants were clean-cut and clean-shaven, one blond, one dark, both well built, each about thirty. The blond one came around to

Hank's side.

"You've got gas?" Hank said, rolling his window down a couple of inches.

The fellow nodded. "What've you got for it besides plastic or paper?"

Hank pulled out his quarters. "These should do. They're all pre-1964—solid silver."

The blond stared at the coins, then called to the dark-haired one.

"Hey, Ray. He's got silver. We want silver?"

Ray came up to the passenger window. "I dunno," he said through the glass. "What else you got?"

"This is it," Hank said.

"What you got in the back?" the blond one said.

A trapped feeling had begun to steal over Hank. He reached for the gearshift.

"Never mind."

His hand never reached it. Both side windows exploded inward, peppering him with glass; a fist came in from his left and smashed against his cheek, showering cascades of flashing lights through his vision. He heard the door open, felt fingers clutch his hair and his shoulder, then he was dragged from behind the wheel and dumped onto his back on the pavement.

Pain shot up and down Hank's spine as he writhed on his back, trying to catch the wind that had been knocked out of him. Above him, he was dimly aware of one of the attendants reaching into the cab and turning off the engine, then taking the keys around to the rear doors. He heard the doors swing open.

"Holy shit!" It was Ray's voice. "Gary! Take a look! This guy's loaded!"

Hank struggled to his feet. He was terrified. A part of him wanted to run, but where? For what? To be caught out in the open when dark came? Or to starve to death if he did find shelter? No! He had to get his supplies back.

He staggered to the rear of his van and tried to slam the nearest door closed.

"That's mine!" he shouted.

The fair one, Gary, turned on him in red-faced fury and lashed out with his fists so fast, so hard, so many times in rapid succession that Hank barely knew what hit him. All he knew was one moment he was on his feet, the next his head and abdomen were exploding with pain, and his face was slamming onto the asphalt drive.

He began to sob. "It's not fair! It's mine!"

He raised his head and spat blood. As his vision slowly cleared, he saw a white car speeding toward them from the parkway. He blinked. Something on top of the car — a red-and-blue flasher bar. And the state seal on the door. A Jersey state trooper.

Thank God!

Groaning, he forced himself up to his knees and began waving with both arms.

"Help! Over here! Help! Robbery!"

The police unit screeched to a halt behind Hank's van, and a tall, graying, bareheaded trooper, resplendent in his gray uniform and shiny Sam Browne belt, hopped out and approached the two thieves still leaning inside the back doors.

"Yo, Captain," Ray said. "Look what we found."

"Fucking supermarket on wheels," Gary said.

The trooper stared at the stacks of cartons.

"Very impressive," he said. "Looks like we caught us a live one."

"Officer," Hank said, not quite believing his ears, "these men tried to rob me!"

The trooper swiveled and looked down at Hank, fixing him with a withering glare.

"We're commandeering your hoard."

"You're *with* them?"

"No. They're with me. I'm their superior officer. I set up this little sting operation to catch hoarder scum and looters on the run. You have the honor of being our first catch of the day."

"I bought all that stuff!" Hank said, struggling to his feet. He stood swaying like a sapling in a gale. "You have no right!"

"Wrong," the trooper said calmly. "I have every right. *Hoarders* have no rights."

"I'll report you!"

His smile was white ice. "Move away, little man. I'm the court of last resort around here. Be thankful I don't have you shot on the spot. Your hoard is about to be divided up among those who'll make the best use of it. It'll see us through until the time comes for us to restore order."

Hank couldn't believe this was happening. There had to be something he could do, someone he could turn to.

And then he saw Gary rip open a carton and pull out a cellophane envelope.

"Hey, look! Oodles of Noodles. My favorite!"

Something snapped inside Hank. Screaming, waving his fists, he charged at Gary.

"That's mine! Get your hands off it!"

He never made it. The captain stepped in front of him and rammed his forearm into Hank's face. Hank reeled back, clutching his shattered nose.

"Get running, little man," the captain said in a tight, cold voice. "Run while you still can."

"I can't!" Hank said, mortally afraid now. "There's no place to go! We're in the middle of nowhere! I've got two bags of silver coins under the front seat. You can have them. Just give me back my van. Please!"

The captain reached for the revolver in his holster. He didn't pause or hesitate an instant. In one smooth, swift motion, he pulled it free, ratcheted the hammer back with his thumb as he raised the revolver and pointed it at Hank's face.

"You just don't get it, do you?"

There was nothing in his eyes as he pulled the trigger. Hank tried to duck, but was too late. He felt a blast of pain in his skull as the world exploded into unbearable light, then collapsed into fathomless darkness.

HANK DIDN'T know how long he'd been phasing in and out of consciousness, but eventually he felt strong enough to move. His head felt three times its normal size and throbbed viciously, but he forced it off the pavement to look around. The movement triggered an explosion of pain through the left side of his skull as the world spun around him. He choked back the vomit that surged into his throat, then he squeezed his eyes shut and held still. And while he held still, he tried to remember what had happened.

He recalled loading the van, driving down the turnpike, turning for gas — Oh Lord. The state trooper. The pistol. The shot.

Hank reached up and gingerly touched the left side of his head. A deep, wet gash above his ear there, clots and soft crusts all up and down the side of his head and neck.

But he was alive. The bullet had glanced off his skull and plowed a deep furrow through his scalp. He was weak, sick, dizzy, hurting like he'd

never hurt before, but he was alive.

Hank opened his eyes again. He was looking down. A puddle of coagulated blood was pooled on the pavement a few inches below his nose. Keeping his eyes fixed on the blood, he pushed himself farther up, pulled his knees under him, then straightened. The vertigo took him for another twirling ride, but when it stopped, he took his bearings.

Green metal bins on either side of him — garbage dumpsters. Framed between them, he could see the rest-stop gas pumps a hundred or so feet away. Deserted now. No phony attendants waving cars forward. To his left was the stuccoed side of a building. The restaurant.

They must have dragged him over here out of sight and left him for dead while they lay in wait for other hapless travelers.

Clenching his teeth against the pain and nausea, he pulled himself to his feet and peered over the dumpsters. The rest stop was deserted. Beyond the pumps the turnpike stood quiet and empty. The cars he'd seen parked over here earlier were gone now.

So was his van.

Hank wanted to cry. Robbed. By state cops, no less! Lord, what was happening to this world? The human monsters acrawl during the day were as bad as the inhuman ones that ruled the night.

Night! He glanced at the sky, at the horizon. Good Lord, it was getting dark. In a few minutes, those horrors would start flying and crawling from their holes. He couldn't be caught out in the open.

He hobbled to the door on the near flank of the snack bar. Locked. He made his way around to the front entrance. The glass double doors were chained shut from the inside. He peered through. A shambles within. It looked as if the place had been ransacked and looted before it had been locked up. No matter. He wasn't worried about food now. All he wanted was to get to shelter.

He looked around in the failing light for something to break the glass — a rock, a garbage can, anything. He found a heavy, stuccoed trash receptacle nearby, but no way could he lift it.

Near panic now, he circled the rest stop, desperate to find a way in. He was halfway around the back, when something whizzed by his head, its jaws grinding as it passed. Then another. He couldn't see them in the dusky light, but he didn't have to. Chew wasps. Here already. There must be a hole nearby.

In a low crouch, he ran for the dumpsters on the far side of the building. Maybe he could hide in one of them — crawl inside and pull the top down over him. Maybe he'd even find some scraps of food among the refuse.

When he reached the dumpsters, he hoisted himself up the side of the first and saw that its hinged top was gone. Same with the other. Now what?

As he eased himself back down, his foot caught in a slot in the pavement. A storm drain. His foot rested on the rusty grate.

Try it! he thought, bending and yanking on the grate. It was square, a couple of feet on each side. No problem getting through if he could pull it free.

Another bug whistled by — close enough to ruffle his hair. A spearhead.

Ignoring the throbbing in his skull that crescendoed toward agony with the effort, he put all of what little strength he had left into lifting the grate. The metal squeaked and moved a quarter inch, then half an inch, then screeched free of its seat. Hank pushed it aside and slid through the opening into the darkness below. Four feet down, his feet landed in a puddle. No problem. Not even an inch deep. He reached up and slid the grate back over the opening. When it clanked into its seat, he slumped into a crouch and looked up at the sky.

Dark up there, but still lighter than down here. As he watched a lonely star break through the dispersing haze, a huge belly fly plopped onto the grate directly over Hank and tried to squeeze through. Its acid sac strained against the openings, bulged into the slots, but it was too wide. Buzzing angrily, the belly fly lifted off and flew away.

He should have been relieved, happy he'd found a safe haven. Instead, Hank found himself sobbing. Why not? No one around to see. He was alone, hurt — still bleeding a little — cold, tired, hungry, no food, no money, no ride, and now he was hiding in a storm drain with dirty, stagnant water soaking through his sneakers. He'd really hit bottom now.

He forced a laugh that echoed eerily up and down the length of the drain. If nothing else, he could soothe himself with the knowledge that things couldn't get worse.

Something splashed off to his right.

Hank froze and listened. What was that? Oh Lord, what was that? A rat? Or something worse — something much, much worse?

He eased his feet out of the water and inched them up the far side of the pipe until he spanned its diameter. If anything was moving through the water, it would pass under him. He peered into the darkness to his right, straining ears and eyes for some sign of life.

Nothing there.

But from his left came a furtive scurrying, moving closer . . . countless tiny clicks and scratches as something — no, *some*things — with thousands of feet slithered toward him along the concrete wall of the drain.

More splashing from the right, bolder now, lots of splashes, hurried, anxious, eager, avid, frantic splashes coming faster, racing toward him. The storm drain was suddenly *alive* with sound and movement, and it was all converging on him.

Hank whimpered with terror and dropped his feet back into the water as he slammed his palms against the grate above and levered it up from its seat. But before it came completely free, a pair of tonglike pincers vised around his right ankle. He shouted his terror and agony, but kept pushing. Another set of pincers lanced into his left calf. His feet were pulled from under him, and he went down to his knees in the stagnant water.

And then, in the faint light through the grate above, he saw them. Huge, pincer-mouthed millipede creatures, like the one he'd seen wriggling from the throat of the corpse in the lobby this morning. The pipe was acrawl with them, five, six, eight, ten feet long. The nearest ones raised their heads toward him, their pincers clicking. Hank slapped at them, trying to bat them away, but they darted past his defenses and latched onto him, digging the ice-pick points of their mandibles into his arms and shoulders. The pain and horror were too much. His scream echoed up and down the hungry pipe as he was dragged onto his back. His arms were pulled above his head, and his legs yanked straight, as he was positioned along the length of the pipe. Cold water soaked his clothes and ran along his spine. And then more of the things leaped upon him, all over him, their countless clawed feet scratching him, their pincers ripping at his clothing, tearing through the protective layers like so much tissue paper until every last shred had been stripped away, and he lay cold and wet and naked, stretched out like a heretic on the rack.

And then they backed off, all but the ones holding him, who continued to pin him there in the water. The drain grew quiet. The sloshing and splashing, the scraping of the myriad feet died away until the only noise

in Hank's ears was the sound of his own ragged breathing.

What did they want? What were they —?

Then came another sound, a heavy, chitinous slithering from the impenetrable darkness beyond his feet. As it grew louder, Hank began to whimper in fear. He began to thrash in the water, struggling desperately to pull free, but the pincers in his arms and legs tightened their grip, digging deeper into his already-bleeding flesh.

And then, in the growing shaft of light from the rising moon, he saw it. A millipede like all the rest, but so much larger. Its head was the size of Hank's torso, its body a good two feet across, half-filling the drainpipe.

Hank screamed as understanding exploded within him. These other, smaller horrors were workers or drones of some sort; they'd captured him and were holding him here for their queen! He renewed his struggles, ignoring the tearing pain in his limbs. He had to get free!

But he couldn't. Sliding over the bodies of her obedient subjects, the queen crawled between Hank's squirming legs until she held her head poised over his chest, staring at him with her huge black multifaceted eyes. As Hank watched in mute horror, a drill-like proboscis extruded from between her huge mandibles. Slowly, she raised her head and angled down over Hank's abdomen. Hank found his voice and screamed again as she plunged the proboscis deep into his abdomen.

Liquid fire exploded at his center and spread into his chest; it ran down his legs and arms, draining the strength from them.

Poison! He opened his mouth to scream again, but the neurotoxin reached his throat first and allowed him to give voice to little more than an especially loud, breathy exhalation. Hank's hands were the last things to go dead, and then he was floating. He still lay in the water, but could not feel its wetness. The last thing he saw before tumbling into a void of blessed darkness was the queen horror with her snout still buried in his flesh.

Hank wasn't sure if he was awake or dreaming. He seemed to be awake. He was aware of noises around him, of a stale, sour odor, of growing light beyond his eyelids, but he could not get those eyelids to move. And he could *feel* nothing. For all he knew, he no longer had a body. Where was he? What —?

And then he remembered. The millipedes . . . their queen. . . . A scream

bubbled up in his throat, but died stillborn. How can you scream when you can't open your mouth?

No. That had been a dream. It had all been a dream — the holes, the flying horrors, storing up the food, deserted by Carol, the rest stop, the trooper, the gun, the bullet, the millipedes — a long, horrible nightmare. But finally it was at an end. He was waking up now.

If he could just open his eyes, he'd see the familiar cracks in the ceiling of their bedroom. And then he'd be free of the nightmare. He'd be able to move then, to reach out an arm and touch Carol.

The eyes. They were the key. He concentrated on the lids, focusing all his will, all his energy into them. And, slowly, they began to move. He didn't feel the motion, but he saw a knife-slit streak of light open across his eyes, pale light, like the glow on the horizon at the approach of dawn.

Encouraged, he doubled his efforts. Light widened around the horizon as the edges of his lids stretched the gummy substance that bound them, then burst through as they broke apart. Not the blaze of the rising sun, but a wan, diffuse sort of light. He forced his lids to separate farther, and the light began to take form through the narrow opening, breaking down into shapes and colors. Vague shapes. A paucity of colors. Mostly grays. His pupils constricted, bringing the images into sharper focus.

He was looking down along a body. His own body, lying in bed, naked atop the sheets. Hazy, but he knew his own body. Thank God, it had all been a dream. He tried to turn his head to the left, toward the light, but it wouldn't move. Why couldn't he move? He was awake now. He should be able to move. He slid his eyeballs leftward. The bedroom window was over there somewhere. If he could just —

Wait . . . the walls — rounded. The ceiling — convex. Concrete. Concrete everywhere! And the light. It came from above. He forced his eyelids open another millimeter. No window — the light was coming through a grate in the concrete ceiling.

The stillborn scream from a moment ago came alive again and rammed up against his throat, pounding at his larynx, crying to be free.

This wasn't the bedroom. It was the pipe — the drainage pipe! It hadn't been a dream. It was real. *Real!*

Hank fought the panic, beat it down, and tried to think. He was still alive. He had to remember that. He was still alive, and it was daytime. The things from the holes were quiet in the daylight hours. They hid from the

light. He had to think, had to plan. He'd always been good at planning.

He shifted his eyes down to his body. His vision was clearer now. He saw the gentle tidal rise and fall of his sparsely haired chest, and farther down, on his belly, he spotted the bloody wound where the queen millipede had spiked him and injected him with her poison. The neurotoxin was still working, obviously, paralyzing his voluntary muscles while it let his heart and lungs go on moving. But it didn't have complete control of him. He'd managed to open his eyes, hadn't he? He could move his eyeballs, couldn't he? What else could he move?

He pulled his gaze away from his abdominal wound and searched for his hands. They lay flopped out on either side, palms up. He checked out his lower limbs. They were intact, slightly spread with the toes angled outward. He could have been a sunbather. His body was the picture of relaxation . . . the relaxation of complete paralysis. He returned his gaze to his arm and followed it down to the hand. If he could move a finger —

And then he noticed the webbing. It was all around him, running in all directions, crisscrossed like gauze. It curved away from each arm and leg like a heavy-duty spiderweb, and ran out to the wall of the drainpipe, where it melted into a glob of some sticky-looking gelatin smeared on concrete. He looked down as much as his slit perspective would permit, and realized that he wasn't lying in the pipe; he was *suspended* in it. From the horizontal lie of his body, he guessed that he was resting on a hammock of web across the diameter of the pipe.

Hank marveled at the coolness of his mind as it analyzed his position. He was trapped — not only paralyzed, but *effectively* and *securely* bound in position. The web hammock, however, was not entirely without its advantages. Long, uninterrupted contact with the cold concrete would have made it difficult for his body to maintain its temperature; the webbing also kept him out of the water, thereby preventing his flesh from breaking down and becoming macerated by the constant moisture.

So, in a very real sense, he was high and dry — but also bound, gagged, and paralyzed.

Hung up like a side of beef.

That last thought impacted with the force of a sledgehammer. That was it! He was food! They'd shot him full of preservatives and stored him away alive so he wouldn't decompose. So when pickings got slim above-ground, they could come down here and devour him at their leisure.

He willed down the rising panic. Panic wouldn't help here. They'd already paralyzed his body. Allowing fear to paralyze his mind would only make matters worse. But that one cold, hard fact battered relentlessly at his defenses.

I'm food!

That rogue-cop lieutenant would get a good laugh out of that: the hoarder becomes the hoard. Even Carol would probably appreciate the irony.

I'm alive, he told himself. And I can beat these bugs.

He knew their pattern. They'd probably stay dormant all day and crawl up to the surface to hunt during the dark hours. That was when he'd get free.

But first he had to regain control of his body. He already controlled his eyeballs and eyelids. Next were his hands. If he were to get free, he'd need them the most. A finger. He'd start with the pointer on his right hand, concentrate all his will and energy into that one digit until he got it to move. Then he'd proceed to the next, and the next, until he could make a fist. Then he'd switch to his left.

He glared at his index finger, narrowed his vision, his entire world to that single digit, channeling all his power into it.

And then it moved.

Or had it? The twitch had been almost imperceptible, so slight it might have been a trick of the light. Or wishful thinking.

But it *had* moved. He had to hold on to that thought. It *had* moved. He was regaining control. He was going to get out of here.

With climbing spirits, he redoubled his concentration on the reluctant digit.

By nightfall, Hank was utterly exhausted, but he would allow himself no sleep.

How could he? With darkness the drainpipe had come alive. First the sibilant stirrings, echoing softly around him, ballooning to a cacophony of hard-pointed mandibles clicking a hungry counterpoint to countless chitinous feet scraping against the concrete; then the sinuous shapes, faint and vague in the light of the rising moon slanting through the grate, undulating toward him from left to right, sloshing through the water below, crawling along the ceiling of the pipe directly above him, the

thinnest of them as thick as his upper arm, the largest as big around as his thigh, ignoring him as they slid by, weaving over, under, and around each other with a hideous, languid grace that seemed to defy gravity, blackening the pale gray of the concrete with Gordian masses of twisting bodies, blotting out the moon as they nosed against the closed grate.

He heard a metallic scrape, a screech, then a clank as the grate fell back onto the pavement above. A sudden change came over the millipedes. Their languor evaporated, replaced by a hungry urgency as they thrashed and clawed at each other in a mad frenzy to join the night hunt on the surface.

Moments later the last of them had squeezed through. Once again there was moonlight, and Hank was alone.

No . . . not alone. Something was coming. Something big. He knew without looking what it was. And a few minutes later, he saw her huge, pincered head rise above him and hover there, swaying.

Not again! Oh no, Lord, not again!

He'd worked since dawn on regaining control of his limbs, and, for most of the day, it had seemed like a hopeless task. No matter how he concentrated, how he strained, his body simply would not respond. But he'd kept at it, and, as the light had started to fail, he'd begun to achieve some results. He'd noticed muscle twitches in his arms and legs, in his abdominal muscles. Either the toxin was wearing off, or he was overcoming it. It didn't matter which. He was regaining control — *that* was what mattered.

But all his efforts would be for naught if the queen dosed him again with her neurotoxin.

She made no move, just hovered there with her head hanging over him. Did she suspect anything?

Oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord!

He'd spent the entire day willing his muscles to move; now he was begging them to be still. One twitch, one tremor, one tiny tic, and she'd ram her proboscis into his gut again and put him back where he'd started.

She watched him for what seemed like forever, then she began to move —

No!

— her head lowering toward his belly —

No!

— and past him. She arched over him, her hard little feet brushing across the skin of his abdomen. He could feel nothing, but he saw his abdominal muscles twitch and roll with revulsion, and he prayed she wouldn't notice.

She didn't. Her near-endless length finally cleared him, and she wound her way out through the drain opening and into the night.

Now he was alone! And now was the time for action.

He strained his arms and legs upward as if fighting against steel manacles. To his delight, he saw the muscles bulge with the effort. His fingers didn't move, didn't close into the rebellious fists he willed for them, but he watched the veins in the undersides of his forearms swell as blood coursed into the resistant muscles, watched his abdominals ripple and swell around the wound as he tried to sit up.

But nothing was happening. His veins and arteries continued to swell, stretching against the envelope of skin, and his abdomen rippled like the Atlantic in a hurricane, but there was no sign of voluntary movement, only chaos.

And then his eyes snapped to the wound below his navel. Something moved there. Something wriggled within it. This morning's scream built again in his unresponsive throat as two slim black pincers, each no more than an inch long, poked into the air. A multi-eyed head, deep brown and gleaming, followed. It paused, glanced around, fixed Hank with its cold black gaze, then dragged its long, many-legged length from the wound with a crinkling *slurp*. Another identical creature quickly followed. Then another.

Hank's once-quiescent and unresponsive body was moving now with a will of its own, writhing and bucking, convulsing, rocking up and down, back and forth in its webbed hammock as his veins and arteries bulged past the limits of their tensile strength and ruptured, freeing more wriggling, pincer, millipede forms.

Something snapped within Hank's mind then. He could almost hear the foundations of his sanity begin to crack and give way. And that was good. He welcomed the collapse.

Yes. Welcomed it. A whole new perspective. Everyone aboveground was dying. Dying and decomposing. Not Hank. No way. Hank was alive and would stay alive through these, his children.

Parenthood at last.

If only I could cry!

He'd wanted it so long; now it had happened. His children. They'd grown within him. Fed off him. Made him part of them. He'd go on living through them while everybody else — including the cop lieutenant and his two renegade underlings — died.

If only I could laugh!

He watched with pride as dozens more of his children broke free of the cramped confines of his body to swarm and crawl with wild abandon over his skin. So good to see them free and moving about, stretching their slender, foot-long bodies, gaining strength before heading to the surface and joining the great hunt. Some of them tangled and began to rake and spear each other with their pincers.

No fighting, children. Save it for topside.

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Just then, two more broke free from the sides of his throat, trailing remnants of the arteries through which they'd been traveling. They rose up and faced him, swaying back and forth like cobras before a snake charmer.

Yes, my children, he wanted to tell them, I am your daddy, and I'm terribly proud of you. I want you to —

Then they reared back and darted forward without warning, each burying a pincer head hungrily into one of his eyes.

No! he wanted to say. I'm your daddy! Don't blind Daddy! How can he watch you grow if you eat his eyes?

But they were naughty children and didn't listen. They kept burrowing inward, deeper and deeper.

If only I could scream!

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Kathe Koja makes a return appearance with a bittersweet story about the sea, the beach, lost teenagers, and mythical beasts. She wraps it all in a tidy package, using the distinctive Koja style, and calls it "The Company of Storms."

The incomparable World Fantasy Award-winning artist, Thomas Canty, provides the cover for the issue. And oh, what a cover it is, filled with wonderful colors, a beautiful woman and — well, you'll just have to see it. The cover illustrates **Lois Tilton's** gentle fantasy, "The Twelve Swans."

Also, next month, **Bruce Sterling** will contribute his first science column — a fascinating look at the space race and the future of space travel.

In upcoming issues, we will travel to Tibet to meet a vulture lady. Mark Twain will take us through Kansas Territory where he'll have a frightening encounter with some other historical personages. We'll go to Mars, swim with dolphins, and explore nanotechnology in our own backyard. Stories by **Marc Laidlaw, Tanith Lee, Bradley Denton, Ray Aldridge, Barry Malzberg, Andrew Weiner, and Harry Turtledove** are scheduled for the next several issues. So find the subscription form on page 160 and fill it out. A thousand surprises await.

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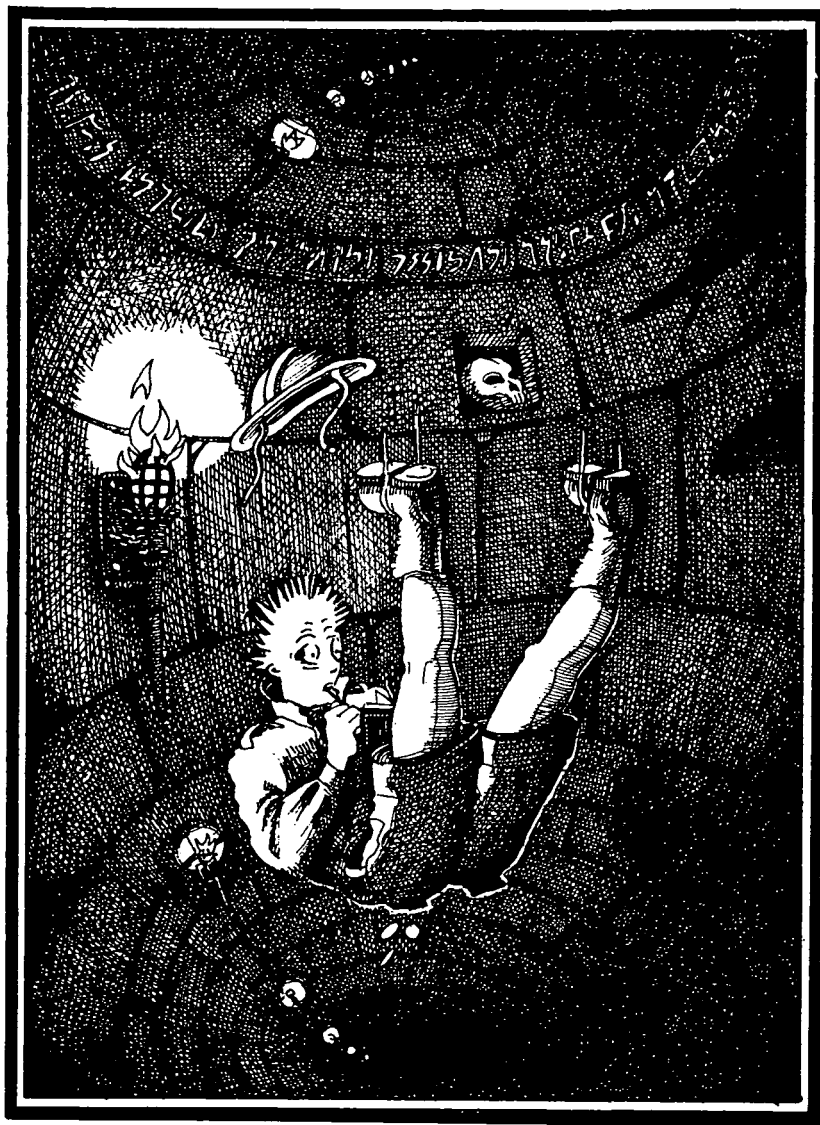
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